やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】
illustration ぽんかん⑧

7
seven

GAGAGA

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Initial Field Trip Study Report

SOBU HIGH SCHOOL YEAR 2 CLASS F

Hikigaya Hachiman

Research Theme: Yasaka Shrine and the Religion of Ghosts

The deity of Yasaka Shrine is Gozu Tenno. Gozu Tenno is known for begetting epidemics and calamities and was once feared as a god of pestilence. Now, he is worshipped as a god at Yasaka Shrine.

The reason for that is due to the Religion of Ghosts. To put it simply, it is a religion that centers on worshipping harmful gods of pestilence as "ghosts" and appeasing them to avoid their wrath. Propitiating them through worship and enshrinement is a means to prevent calamities.

To be hated and to be feared results in persecution and scorn. When that entire process completes, the next eventual step is to be worshipped. In this country, it is common for detested beings such as vengeful ghosts to be treated as gods. In particular, Sugawara no Michizane was once feared so much as a vengeful spirit that he became an object of worship.

When all is said and done, those who are hated are the ones closest to god. On the other hand, can we not call this proof that they are the superior ones in the world?

So, that's how it is. I was a god all along...

Chapter 1

Even so, **Hachiman Hikigaya** will spend his school life in peace

Aren't girls cuter when they choose to be lightly dressed over being heavily dressed? That train of thought indicated that it was about time for that kind of season.

The school festival ended and the sports festival finished without issue. The year will be at its end in a little less than two months.

The hot weather cooled down at short moment's notice and what followed were not cool winds, but freezing ones. For this school that was erected on the coast, it was all the more expected.

Something else worth mentioning was that my surroundings were just as cold.

The space around my seat, which was smack-dab in the middle of class, akin to the eye of the typhoon, mirrored an isolated vacuum that nobody dared to approach. Maybe it was a special trait of Japanese people, but they do love their edges and corners. When you're riding the train or bus, you'd want to sit at those spots. Give Edge-chan and Corner-chan a personality and you'll find them to be quite popular.

Because of that, the immediate vicinity of my seat that was situated in the heart of class was all but empty.

It's the same as usual. What was different was what the stares conveyed.

It wasn't that they were being oblivious, but that they were deliberately giving gazes that screamed out "wait, what, you were there?". Stares that shot in my direction for a split moment and then they'd look like they were about to burst into laughter, those kinds of stares.

When I surveyed the room to pinpoint the origin of these stares, our gazes would meet.

That exchange was something that would warrant me to look the other way, also known as the Hikigaya style.

With that being said, it was normal for them to avert their gaze.

That was how it was up until now.

But, now that they were in a position of superiority, that wasn't the case. In fact, after our eyes met for a full two seconds, they'd sneer to themselves "he's totally looking our way (lol)", "what's with him (lol)", "gross (lol)"; these stylish jokes went back and forth in their witty conversations.

You know, I'm feeling a little like Panda-chan. No, maybe that's a little too much. Maybe a wooper looper and a sea monkey might be better. Oh dear, what's with these lovable creatures? Both disgusting and cute fellows, aren't they?

…Well, I need this much encouragement or else I think my heart just might break a little.

Though, I'm sure you'd cry yourself to sleep late at night when you find that there's definitely something missing over at the edge. Speaking of the hardness of super humans, diamonds, myself being of diamond-level class, are quite resistant to scratches, but can actually easily be crushed by a hammer. Someone claimed diamonds couldn't be destroyed. That's a lie.

Fortunately, it seems that the entire school body had moved on from the anti-Hikigaya phase. In the first place, my presence was all but nonexistent, though everybody was quick to latch on to something else of interest. There was a phrase that said gossip lasted seventy five days and that was fitting. It'd be something similar to changing your "waifu" every season.

The poor treatment that I've been subjected to gradually diminished over time to the point that I won't even be called on to "That Person is Now!?"; that was my current relevance. [1]

The world has absolutely no interest in me. It's because there are a lot of fun things out there.

Class was bustling with lighthearted and refreshing conversations today as well.

Coming from the back of class were loud voices that sounded similar to a gorilla drumming its chest, voices that carried on a conversation and were loud enough to attract attention. By the way, if we translate that to Japanese, it'd be "drumming".[2]

In their conversation of many assorted flavors, they talked with voices as if to assert their existence in class. When I slightly glanced over in their direction, it

was the trio of three, Tobe, Oooka, and Yamato sitting on their desks. You have seats, so why aren't you sitting in them?

"Beh, whacha gonna do on the field trip?"

When Tobe brought up a topic, Oooka responded with his hands elevated in the air.

"Kyoto, right? Definitely the USJ. The U. S. J! U. S. J!" [3]

"Ain't tha' in Osaka?"

"There it is! An authentic comeback, I'd say!"

…Wow.

Yamato retorted in an oddly low voice while Tobe frolicked around. Seriously, I could drop dead anytime listening to that. If there was an actual Kansai person here, he'd toss an ashtray at them.

Getting angry at terrible imitations of the Kansai dialect is a special characteristic of theirs. It's what Conan-kun said, ya kno'.[4]

The Kansai dialect of an individual from Kanto isn't as delicate. They'd just be as guilty if you checked whether they'd let it go or not.*

For me, it was something I was completely unaware of, but those three continued to talk happily. Occasionally, they'd turn to the girls and give them a look with wretched grins as if to say "we're talking about some good stuff here, ain't we?".

"You know, going out to Osaka would be a total pain though."

"Ain't you right."

Oooka's face brightened with an awfully satisfied expression at the talking Tobe who was playing with his hair. Then, there was the collected and slow-witted Yamato. He was quick on the uptake and after some careful thinking, as if he was carefully aiming at something, he opened his mouth.

"…You can go by yourself Tobe, yeah."

"Oh waait! You're gonna leave me out like that! That should be for Somethingtani-kun~!"

A sudden burst of laughter.

On closer inspection, the nearby Oda and Tahara were trying to hold in their laughter, shoulders trembling as they played on their phone; “pfufufu”.

Yes, yes, totally interesting. Totally a white tale.*

Well, that’s the treatment I’m getting these days. They trudge along the limit of what they think they can say, adding a joke in one after the other.

By the way, at our school, the only bullying that exists comes in the form of jokes. It was something along the lines of we’re not bullying him~ or we’re just teasing him~. Regardless of how cruel their words or conduct were, “it was a joke” would settle things for good, super convenient. No matter whom it was, akin to where “Vegeta, you should laugh”, you can’t help but laugh. [5]

However, the reason for this behavior is none other than for the sake of their usual practice of “accepting”.

For times when they can’t deal with something, they compromise by turning it into a laughing matter. It’s a necessity that allows cliques to deal with unknown irregularities.

Indeed, the first period of class F had a band of Sagami sympathizers who fervently lobbied in her favor. The glares of contempt directed at me and their beautiful camaraderie with Sagami was quite the sight to behold, but our time as high school students is all but fleeting. Around the time the sports festival had ended, the “Sagami is pitiful” boom shifted to the current “let’s make fun of Hikitani-kun” boom. I am the loved child of the century, seriously.

With Sagami, who was originally the root of all things, already being forgotten, the remaining precedent of the treatment of Hikigaya Hachiman smoothly transitioned into a pastime.

This pastime, as it was, turned into something akin to a religious rite and that was understandable. Back then, rites were carried out because it had a purpose, but now the meaning of that had been lost altogether. For example, Christmas and the Bon Festival dance is enjoyed by everyone regardless of how it came to be and this mirrored how people chose to accept things.

Before long, by assimilating it into the culture, they can reestablish their unity as well as seeing their identity as a group in a new light.*

Well, they'll lose interest soon enough though.

But, the class that was swelling up in excitement over the field trip was currently at its peak.

People flock to their own cliques, making talk of where they plan to go and what they should do. Indeed, when they needed to flaunt their "clique power", it was a necessary rite.

Tobe and his buddies continued blurting "Somethingtani-kun, Somethingtani-kun" all the while shifting the topic of their conversations. You know, my name isn't actually Hikitani in the first place…

Oooka opened his mouth while rubbing his cropped head in which Yamato followed in agreement.

"You know, the field trip, huh, that ain't good."

"Ain't good at all."

"What is?", but I can't ask that. Things that aren't good aren't good. What isn't good is seriously not good. The conversation continued in loops, but I can't butt in. That's not good.

"Oh yeah, you know. Tobe, what are you going to do about that?"

Oooka fidgeted around restlessly as he asked Tobe who started to act abashed for some reason.

"Wha, you wanna hear? You wan' to hear don'tcha. It's like that, ya know. It's decided."

He coughed lightly and paused.

"…I mean, I'll decide."

Tobe spoke with a pointlessly, stiff expression and the other two went 'oooh' in admiration. What's that, did you decide to take some dangerous drug? Because their speech was so fragmented, it felt more like they were high off their minds.

Tobe and friends suddenly adjusted their voices and started speaking in whispers. It looked like they didn't want anyone listening in on their conversation.

It might have been that since everyone, including those three, began to focus on their own conversations, their stares were no longer directed at me. Having confirmed this with a glance, I stared at the ceiling in a daze. When I slumped down and rested my body against the chair, my back was feeling quite comfortable. As I breathed out, I slowly closed my eyes.

Everyone engaged in conversations about the upcoming field trip which livened up the classroom. Because of that, I was freed from all of the sneering and uncomfortable gazes.

Suddenly, my sight darkened. 'What sorcery is this' was what I thought, but when I opened my eyes, it was a familiar chest. Wait, no. A familiar face.

"Yahallo!"

Looking from above and down onto me was Yuigahama.

"Yeah…"

I was just about to tumble over from my seat, but I held back the urge and responded back smoothly.

"You'll be going to club today, right?"

"Yeah."

"I see. I'll see you at the room later then."

She talked to me with a quiet voice. Quite the act of consideration, I'd say. In the one moment when I wasn't the focus of attention, she came to talk to me.

With her hand in front of her chest, she waved slightly to me and went in the direction of Miura. Speaking of Miura, she glanced at me with a puzzled look before shifting her eyes back to her cellphone.

That's what you would expect from the Queen who walked her own hellish, fiery path; she didn't seem to have any interest in people of the lower class. She's neither enemy nor ally, not even neutral either, but I'm thankful for this one-sided relationship.

It's likely that she didn't want to look at me, but was more concerned about Yuigahama.

With this kind of atmosphere, the act of talking to me was a risky maneuver, but Yuigahama's ability to read the mood without making anyone feel uncomfortable was not something to scoff at.

The implication from this could be that she was looking to protect her image, but her wanting to keep me from being anyone's target was much more apparent.

Those who are hated that need to stay in a clique have to make the effort to eliminate the factors that can be used against them. Don't make mistakes, don't show your blunders, and don't let your weaknesses be exposed; these three points are the most important. They're the same thing, aren't they?

Despite that, showcasing off your perfection as an individual can be used against you as well. That's why, it's important to not do anything. If you don't do anything, nothing will go wrong.

Also, don't get involved with anyone.

Getting involved will undoubtedly bring forth friction. It won't be limited to just the two of you for there is something called a person's line of sight. You should especially be careful of making contact with people who catches the public eye.

It'd be better for me if I was a bit more careful. Involving people isn't something I'd want.

For Yuigahama who's near the top of the food chain, with consideration on the timing, she was able to call out to me without attracting attention, but that naivety is something to be wary of.

I'm glad that I was able to erase my presence up until now, but it might be a good idea to use even more physical means. Like messing around with my phone as I walk out of the classroom. Or maybe, look like I'm about to pick up the phon…, that would get exposed fast. They'd be quick to assume that no one would bother to call me.

In the end, there wasn't anything I could do so I assumed a sleeping posture once more.

As recess was about to end, the classroom was seeing busy traffic. People who went to other classes to play, people who went to the bathroom, people who went to buy drinks. They all returned in succession.

When I slightly opened my eyes, at the corner of my field of vision was a long, fluttering ponytail.

With blue reflecting hair that was tied up in a boring way, that person was making giddy faces at her cellphone and then quickly making a bored looking expression.

That brocon, is she mailing her brother again? I'd better stay vigilant when I'm texting Komachi. I'll get called a siscon. It'll even go as far as Sister Princess. Wait, no way.

Kawaswhateversaki, in short Kawasaki, looked around class suspiciously. Apparently, she was worried if anyone saw her grinning face from earlier.

That gaze clashed with mine.

"Eek!"

Kawasaki jumped in shock as she let out an odd, quiet shriek. As we looked at each other, her face turned bright red and she quickly went to her seat with her head hanging down.

Kawasaki had been acting like that ever since the Culture Festival; she'd never get anywhere close to me and every time our gazes met, she'd conspicuously avert her eyes.

Good, good, that's how it should be. In order for us to both lead peaceful lives, it'd be best to be in tune with our sense of distance.

There are people who brazenly claim that humans are the only ones that slaughter their own kind, but that's a little off base. Animals are just the same, they would kill each other in earnest for the sake of territory. School had its own set of territories and it made sense that there would be competition over them.

Furthermore, as high school students, we all belong in our respective cliques and hierarchies which mirror that of a set of different races.

We all are individually different existences.

Proof of that can be seen in the individual that is taking every step closer my way; you wouldn't think of him as being part of the same race.

"Hachiman."

That voice was a harmony sent by the heavens, those steps that walked above the clouds, and the figure that truly epitomized an angel.

Totsuka is seriously an angel.

Because Totsuka is too much of an angel, unlike those shitty humans, he came to talk to me, not mindful of the atmosphere.

“We have to decide on groups in the upcoming LHR apparently.” [6]

Totsuka informed me of the information that he had picked up from somewhere. In a week, we’ll be spending three days and four nights on the field trip. The first day will consist of moving around as a class, the second day will be with your respective groups, and the third day will be total freedom. Since the activities for the first day were already set in stone, all the conversations in class were centered on the second and third days.

In other words, we’d be deciding groups in the upcoming LHR and about two-third of it would have already been decided, so it’ll be an important confrontation.

But, well, since I’ll just be tagging along from behind with the group of leftover people, it doesn’t matter to me.

“…I see. But, most people already have things in mind, don’t they?”

“Is that so… I’m still undecided, though.”

Amongst the different groups of people who were already settled in and decided where to go, Totsuka, whose group had yet to choose locations to visit which may have been embarrassing, murmured quietly.

“…”

It was a strange silence and having noticed that, Totsuka raised his face and smiled as if trying to fool someone.

--I want to protect this smile.

Normally, I’d be averse to having the mentality of inviting others, but this is a field trip after all. It wouldn’t be that bad to try just a little here. Still, putting in the effort for another guy, something’s wrong here.

“…Well, let’s form a group then.”

“Yeah!”

I could feel myself being fulfilled as I look upon that smile full of happiness and energy. If I was a wandering ghost, I’d enter Nirvana instantly, and right now, if I was invited to the self-defense force, I would probably enlist.

“Now, two more. What should we do?”

“Four man group huh… The only thing we can do is just dock with a group of two later.”

As the remaining leftovers, this was an operation of insignificant importance.

“Right! Now, we need to think of where to go…”

“Hm, whatever’s fine.”

Class looked like it was about to start. I gently nudged Totsuka to go to his desk, who looked like he would remain standing there engrossed in thought. I made sure to touch his shoulders ever so slightly before he left.

Totsuka replied positively and with a light wave, he headed to his seat.

The stares in our surrounding focused on Totsuka for a moment, but maybe because of their indifferent opinion of him, he wasn’t subjected to their feelings of disgust. *It seems Totsuka had a slightly different social status.

Looking ahead, there isn’t a need to attract any more attention than necessary.

I’ll continue to do what I usually do. Since no one’s going to bother to talk to me, they won’t make the effort to approach me either.

If I just keep my proper distance, then that should be fine. As long I keep that in mind, there shouldn’t be any problems.

Just like every other day, I pretended to be asleep. It was important for this act to be done properly for the sake of my own presence of mind.

Just as I was about to lay my head on my left arm pillow, I saw a rare combination entering from the right side of my vision.

It was just before class started.

Both Hayama and Ebina had just returned to class. While I've seen them together in their group quite often, I've rarely seen just the two of them together talking to each other.

Oh right, they weren't around for a while now.

Hayama and Ebina looked like they were having a secret conversation and after exchanging a few words, they separated.

Ebina headed in the direction of Miura and Yuigahama while greeting them with "hallo, hallo" with a cheerful demeanor. The two responded in the same way as usual to her liveliness.

However, unlike them, Hayama's expression was unsteady.

He made an anguished smile which was unusual for a guy like him. If I were to say, it looked like he was feeling down from some sort of self-deprecation.

For someone like me who wasn't on good terms with him, I noticed at least that much. I'm sure the others understood as well.

Within the group of three, the first one to call out to him was Tobe.

"Wait a sec', where'd you go Hayato-kun? Are you doing things on your own like Somethingtani-kun?"

"It's nothing. At least let me go to the bathroom by myself. Also, you really like that joke don't you. You're using it too much."

Still smiling, Hayato poked at Tobe's head.

"Beeh."

With a light comeback, Tobe exhaled wordlessly and as if they were following behind Hayama, Yamato and Oooka continued.

"Yeah. Do it too much and you'll totally drop."

"You mean, Tobelly drop." [7]

"It's me now, huh! Give me a break!"

Their combined laughter filled the room.

In that time, Tobe that, don’t Tobe that, and various other Tobe jokes continued and in the class of 2F, the Tobe trend became the new to-go joke.

Just what you’d expect from Hayama’s group, the leading group of public opinions. The Hikitani joke became a relic of the past.

Thanks to them, I’ve obtained my days of peace once more.

The unchanging and glorifying isolation like before.

In fact, unlike before, I feel even more distant from the others. My presence plunged into the darkness.

Now, I feel like a ninja. Greetings, I am ninja Hikigaya.

I can’t wait to go visit Kinkaku Temple in Kyoto…

Chapter 2

No one knows why they came to the service club

The sounds of hissing could be heard from a tea kettle that was brought into this room at some point or another. Yukinoshita, who noticed that the water had boiled, neatly folded the edge of her magazine. This is what you'd call dog ears. The cat lover Yukinoshita would probably say "they're not dog ears, but the ears of a Scottish Fold" instead. For your information, a Scottish Fold happens to be a rare breed of cats and one of their characteristics that make them popular are their folded ears which are similar to a dog's.

Yukinoshita placed her magazine on top of the desk, stood up, and walked to the tea kettle.

Yuigahama, who was playing with her cellphone in the meanwhile, called out to Yukinoshita with eyes full of expectation.

"Yay! Snacks!"

In the same way Yukinoshita prepared the cups and tea leaves, Yuigahama rummaged through her bag and unveiled tea cakes.

An exquisite cup and saucer were prepared on top of the desk. There was also a mug with a lethargic looking dog printed on it.

As Fall comes near to an end, you'll start seeing hints of Winter approaching. As I read my paper book, the sight of Yukinoshita pouring black tea entered from the corner of my vision.

When she filled the glass tea pot with boiling water, the leaves slightly danced around. The whirling like movements and like the slow decline of snow in a snow globe, the tea leaves gently sunk to the bottom.

After Yukinoshita filled the cup followed by the mug, she paused with the tea pot in one hand. She placed her other hand on her chin and after some careful consideration of something, she reached out for a paper cup nearby and filled that as well.

As if there was something she wasn't convinced of despite filling it herself, she glared at the paper cup with a cold expression. She replaced the tea leaves in the porcelain pot and covered it with the lid to keep it warm.

Yukinoshita took both the cup and saucer and returned to her seat. Next was Yuigahama, who grabbed her cup while mashing on her phone.

The lone paper cup that no one reached for. The steam rose as if it was a lost child drifting around.

“The tea… it’ll get cold you know.”

“…I have a cat’s tongue.”

The fact that she had prepared it for me didn’t register with me for some time. But, I wasn’t that perverse to refuse someone who went through the trouble of preparing something for me.

I reached out for the cup giving an impression that it might be cooler now.

As I blew at the tea and took a sip, Yuigahama was holding her mug with both hands while blowing at it and spoke.

“Oh yeah, it’s almost time for the field trip.”

Yukinoshita’s eyebrows reacted in response to those words. It’s all the rage in class these days. It seems that the fad had made it to this service club that I was affiliated with.

“Have you decided on where to go yet?”

“We’re going to figure it out soon.”

“Depends on where the guys in my group want to go.”

The field trip to me, in short, was nothing more than compulsory relocation.

The guys in my group will blatantly ignore my opinions and make plans regardless of what I say and treat me like air; I’ll be following these guys around quietly.

I’m not particularly dissatisfied since it’ll be easier for me this way, but it’s somewhat different from fun.

Irregularities are irregularities and for good natured groups with amiable kids, chances are that they’ll listen to your opinion. But, they’ll eventually end up trying to get rid of you.

For someone like me who has a long history of being an irregularity, it was a very obvious thing. It should be the same way for Yukinoshita who was treated the same way.

“By the way, Yukinoshita. What do you do during events and field trips?”

When I asked with curiosity, Yukinoshita tilted her head with her cup in one hand.

“? What do you mean?”

“You don’t have any friends in class, right?”

From a third person perspective, you’d think it to be a really crude question, but Yukinoshita didn’t show any signs of being bothered. She answered indifferently.

“Yes. So?”

“Nah, I was just wondering what you did about groups.”

Having said that, it looked like Yukinoshita grasped what I was actually asking for as she placed down her cup and opened her mouth with a look of conviction.

“…Aah, if you’re talking about that, I was invited and haven’t responded yet.”

“Huh, y-you were invited?”

When I answered back with a question in surprise, Yukinoshita made a slightly sullen expression.

“I don’t know what kind of image you have of me, but when it comes to deciding groups, I usually don’t have a problem. Usually, a girl from one of the groups comes to talk to me.”

Yukinoshita brushed away her hair that rested along her shoulder as she spoke and Yuigahama, who was listening close by, brought her mug to her lips and raised her head.

“Aah, I totally kinda get that. At least for class J, since it’s full of girls, they’ll definitely like a girl like Yukinon who gives off a very cool vibe.”

“Haa, I see… At least for class J, huh.”

Yukinoshita was a denizen of class J, a person of international cultural worth. Class J was comprised of ninety percent girls and unlike regular classes, the things they were taught were a bit different which gave them an atmosphere of some all-girls high school from somewhere. In fact, when I passed by the class, there was a good smell, well, actually, there were so many different smells mixed in together, it made me feel nauseous. Also, during the winter season, there was a high likelihood that the girls would wear jerseys under their skirts and have fun flipping each other’s skirts. Watching that from afar is actually pretty fun.

Because Yukinoshita’s class was comprised primarily of the same gender, it was probably relaxing, comfortable, and easy to do things as you want. I could also say that it makes it easier for cliques to form as well.

That is one of the benefits when there’s the lack of the opposite sex.

In the case of boys, they try to flaunt their eccentricities to the girls. Just like how Tobe and company were drumming in class a while ago, or those who act like delinquents, or even the group of guys who suffer from middle schooler’s disease[8], they can all be included in that group. Ah, of course, I’m no exception.

And so, girls probably exhibit that same type of behavior.

In fact, I'm sure Yukinoshita had her fair share of those experiences in her life all the way up until now. If we round up the boys and girls in one class, there should be a lot of going on. If there's a lot going on in the space between boys and girls, then there's a lot going on in the boys and girls group as well. There's a lot going on in life and there's a lot going on in pension.

"Haaa~. Like really, I really wish we would go to Okinawa."

Yuigahama sat down superficially and spoke while looking up at the ceiling.

"It's a little questionable going there during this season… I wouldn't recommend it."

As she said this, Yukinoshita stared out the window. The chilly wind was blowing outside. Okinawa may be in the southern part of the country, but with this kind of season, there's no way you could look forward to screaming out "it's the ocean!", "it's the sea", "it's the marine!" for fun.

"Eeh? But, if we went to Kyoto, there's like nothing we can do you know? It's just temples and shrines and stuff, you know? If I wanted that, I'd just check my neighborhood… I can go to Asama Shrine in Inage any time I want to so…"

Truly, superb, Yuigahama-esque words. Just listening made my head hurt. Yukinoshita might have felt the same way since she was lightly pressing against her temples.

"You just don't see the importance of history and the cultural worth at all, do you…"

In response to these words that was mixed with sighs and murmurs, Yuigahama assumed a stance looking to object.

"I mean, I dunno what you can do at a temple once you get there…"

Well, it's not like I don't get what she's saying. For the guys who have no interest in Buddhist temples and shrines, I'm sure they just don't care. It's likely that a majority of high school students don't bother with them save for the first shrine visit of the New Year and family ceremonies.

"There're plenty of things to do. In the first place, the purpose of going isn't to have fun, but to learn. Of course, it's not only for history, but also to see and experience firsthand this country's culture…"

"I don't think that's the problem here."

I cut Yukinoshita's graceful opinion short.

"Oh. Well, what do you think the field trip is for?"

As if she was irritated from being interrupted, Yukinoshita faced me with challenging eyes. That's a little scary, missy. But, I'm not backing down here.

"Here's what I think… It's what they call imitation of the life in society."

"…I see. That's true, there's the Bullet Train, public transportation, and lodging…"

Yukinoshita crossed her arms engrossed in thought and stared off to the upper-right. However, my talk wasn't over.

"You go on business trips you don't want to go to, meet with superiors who you don't want to meet, and you have to show up at whatever place you go to. You don't get to decide where to stay or what to eat either. On top of that, even the field trips are where your own opinions get brushed aside when you exchange ideas and you have to adjust, adjust, AND adjust. And with the money you have on you, you have to think about various things such as 'this kind of gift should be good for him, and well for him, it should be fine even if he doesn't get one'. It's probably to learn that kind of stuff. It's basically training for when things won't go the way you want it to, but by making some compromises, you can have some fun at the expense of deceiving yourself."

After I finished, Yuigahama looked at me with pitiful eyes.

"Woow. Hikki's field trip doesn't sound like it'd be any fun at all…"

"If you're that pessimistic, I don't think you'll be able to make any plans at all…"

Yukinoshita spoke with a feeling of bafflement and Yuigahama went "ah" as if something came to mind.

"B-But you know, even if it's like Hikki said, how we enjoy it is up to us, right?"

"Hm, I guess…"

Indeed, regardless of what curriculum or assignment was imposed upon you, how you feel about it depends entirely on what you want to do about it.

Yukinoshita smiled unexpectedly, giving approval to that rebuttal.

"I suppose… Even Hikigaya has one or two things that he finds fun, right?"

"Yeah…"

Being in the same room as Totsuka or taking a bath with Totsuka or eating with Totsuka; well, I guess I'm looking forward to it a little.

"Hikki, so you do have things you enjoy?"

"Nah, well, at the very least, I'm quite fond of Kyoto."

When I responded, Yukinoshita stared at me.

“That’s surprising… I thought you were the type to treat traditions and social formalities as trash.”

Oh, that’s a real mean statement you said right there. But, I guess I’m used to this already.

“For the liberal arts schools centered on Japanese history and the Japanese language, it’s one of the many sacred places, after all."

Speaking of historical novels, Shiba Ryotaro was particularly interested in novels like the recent “The Tatami Galaxy”, and so the city of Kyoto that I had an interest in was something to be excited about.

“Well, that’s what the field trip is, you can’t go to the places you want to go to. I’ll go by myself at some point.”

“Isn't it a bit too lonely going on a trip by yourself...”

Yuigahama murmured. Nah, I think it’s pretty fun. One man trip. The fact that you don’t have to meet with anyone is what makes it great. The one person who thought just like me, Yukinoshita, nodded in agreement.

“That’s not true at all. Going on a trip by yourself is enjoyable in that you can look around at your own pace."

“Right, right, not to mention you can immerse yourself in the atmosphere. If I saw a bunch of noisy punk high school students at the Ryoanji Zen garden, I might just pick up a rock from the garden and smash their heads in.”

“I wouldn’t do that… It’s a place in the UNESCO, after all.”

Yukinoshita didn’t look too pleased with what I said. But, your reason is a little academic, yes. Your humanism is falling apart though.

“How about you guys? Any place you want to go?”

“I haven’t looked up any places to go yet… Ah, but, I kinda want to see Kiyomizu-dera. It’s famous and all.”

“Your fad-following tendencies are showing…”

I replied without thinking to the Yuigahama-esque response and she pouted.

“C’mon, it’s whatever. Also, Kyoto Tower would be nice too.”

“Chiba has something like that too, you know.”

“That’s the port tower, isn’t it!?”

The name’s totally similar, really. Then again, the name is the only thing that’s similar.

I suppose it makes sense to be attached to things of my hometown. I love it, that port tower. I haven't had a chance to go there ever since the fireworks display though.

Yukinoshita took a jab at my love for my hometown.

"If you're talking about port towers, then Kobe's tower is more famous though."

"That's fine, Chiba's tower is definitely higher."

"I don't know what's so fine about that…"

Yukinoshita looked like she was trying to avoid a headache since she was pressing at her temples.

"So, Yukinoshita. How about you?"

Having been asked, she took some time to think.

"I… there's the Ryoan-ji rock garden and Kiyomizu-ji like you and Yuigahama mentioned but, I want to take a look at Rokuon-ji and Jishou-ji which are just as famous."

It might have been because she had never heard these names before that she couldn't help but blink with empty eyes.

"Rokuonjishouji…"

"Don't combine them… That sounds like a totally awesome name, doesn't it?"

Rokuonjishouji. He's likely a powerful monk archetype, at least by name.

"Should I have said the more general names, Kinkaku and Ginkaku, instead?"

"Y-You should've said that in the first place! Ah, but I'll be going to Kinkaku-ji. Yumiko wanted to see it too."

"That fits her image way too much…"

It was too fitting of her gorgeous image. As I imagined golden ornaments jingling on Miura, Yukinoshita continued talking.

"There's also the Philosopher's Walk. It's about that time of for blooming sakura trees, although autumn is coming up too. I'd like to see the special viewing at various temples and shrines at night if we could fit it into the schedule… But once it gets dark out, that might be a little difficult during the field trip."

Yuigahama looked with a puzzled expression at Yukinoshita, who talked in succession.

"So detailed…"

"What, did you look at Jalan[9]?"

These guys, aren't they looking forward to this a little too much…?

“Not really… It’s general knowledge of Kyoto that everyone should know about.”

Suddenly pouting, Yukinoshita looked away and reached for her magazine. Wait a minute, on closer inspection, that magazine she was reading was really “Jalan”.

However, it was very rare for Yukinoshita to be looking forward to a trip so innocently.

I turned away while holding the urge to burst out laughing. My eyes met with Yuigahama who felt the same way and because that felt even funnier, we couldn’t help but let our expressions crack a little.

“…What is it?”

“N-Nothing at all! Nothing!”

Yukinoshita pierced us with a cold stare, but the panicky Yuigahama tried to brush her off by waving her hands. But, that had no effect whatsoever as Yukinoshita continued to glare at us with a chilly indifference.

“A, hahaha… Ah, right. Yukinon, let’s go around together on the third day!”

Yuigahama laughed with a miserable expression from being glared at but made a proposal. Yukinoshita tilted her head in response.

“Together?”

“Yeah, together!”

Yukinoshita asked back and Yuigahama showed her a bright smile. But, Yukinoshita looked like she was still thinking. Slowly, she opened her mouth. I already predicted what she would say.

“But…”

“Yukinoshita’s in a different class.”

When I said this in advance, Yuigahama nodded without hesitation.

“Yeah. But, we get to do whatever we want on the third day, so I’ll contact you and we’ll have fun in Kyoto!”

“I don’t think we’re allowed to do that much…”

“Eh? It should be okay, right? I don’t really know though.”

So whimsical, this girl…

But, if we’re free to do what we want, I guess I’ll just wander around. I always wanted to go there, the Shinsengumi Quarters and Ikedaya. Apparently, Ikedaya was turned into a bar now though. I get the feeling I’ll get all hyped up if I go around those historical landmarks by myself.

As my mind raced around on different thoughts, Yuigahama continued the conversation.

“I mean, as long it fits with the schedule. How about it?”

“…I don’t mind.”

“Yeah! We’re all set then!”

Yukinoshita gently looked away while the smiling Yuigahama moved her seat slightly closer to Yukinoshita.

I wonder if this intimacy is something beautiful at all. Well, despite being in different classes, if they’re going to have fun on the field trip together, then it’s probably a good thing.

“You too Hikki, let’s go around!”

“Mm, ah.”

Yuigahama’s gaze found its way in my direction for a split moment from her big eyes. The answer to those words that came out from left field was jammed in my throat.

As I thought about how to answer, there was a knock on the door that ate up the silence.

“Come in.”

When Yukinoshita answered, the door opened.

At the door were unexpected individuals. Actually, all the surprising individuals that come here are people who shouldn’t come here at all… Whether this was right or reasonable, people of expected groups were very unlikely to come.*

But, right now, at the forefront of those groups were unexpected guys who came to visit.

Hayama and behind him were Tobe, Yamato, and Oooka.

Indeed, it was those four. I had no clue whether they really were on good terms or not, but to outsiders, they looked like an intimate group of four.

It might have been because he had stopped by this room several times that Hayama entered the room without hesitation, but the other three filled the room curiously.

And then, their gazes stopped on me.

It didn’t need to be said to understand what they were thinking. All three of them made a strange expression in unison. They then exchanged glances between each other while peeking over at me.

However, I can't blame them for those crude stares. That was because I was doing the same to them as well.

Why are these guys here?

Of course, I wasn't the only one with that question as Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were thinking the same thing.

"Is there something you need?"

Yukinoshita inquired with a cold tone in which Yuigahama nodded.

When asked, Hayama glanced at Tobe as if confirming something. The person in question, Tobe, was pulling at his hair repeatedly while fidgeting and this was oddly revolting.

"Aah, he had something he wanted advice on, so I brought him here, but…"

Hayama spoke with a distant tone and as such, it seems that the consultation didn't have anything to do with Hayama himself, but with one of the fellows surrounding him.

"C'mon, Tobe."

"Out with it."

With the two on the side urging him, just as Tobe was opening his mouth, he closed them and started thinking with a slight groan. What's going on, is this an occult magazine?

After his session of being in deep thought, he shook his head. His long hair shook along with his head similar to how stray dogs dry themselves when they're completely soaked.

"Nah, definitely no way. No way I can talk with Hikitani here."

…Say what? What's the deal, is there a bargain sale for fights happening here? Oh?

The rage I felt could have awoken my heart that was filled with compassion, but after a deep breath, I quietly spat out my wrath. After I calmed down, I glanced around my surroundings. Yamato and Oooka were giggling, saying "not much you can do, yeah" while Hayama sighed. Yuigahama opened her mouth in shock while Yukinoshita's lips were tightly shut.

A brief moment of silence.

My butt was feeling a little itchy and the one who broke the silence was Hayama.

"Tobe. We're the ones that came for help."

"Yea, but see, there's no way I'd talk this over with Hikitani ya know~ Like, he has zero reliability."

They’ve acknowledged my existence and in my case, I seem to be quite hated, but I didn’t think I’d discover this fact here of all places.

The people who came here for a request stayed quiet, giving birth to silence. Thanks to that, I was able to hear a voice quite well.

“Irritating…”

Thank you for voicing out the feelings of my heart. But, Yuigahama, why are you so restless after saying that?

“Tobecchi, you didn’t need to say it that way, yeah? There’re better ways to say it.”

“Yeah, but like reeaaally.”

I’m grateful that they told him to be careful of what he’s saying, but we can’t be making any trouble with Yuigahama here.

Just as I thought about what to do, Yukinoshita was already prepared to answer.

“I see. Well, there’s nothing we can do if it’s Hikigaya’s fault. As expected… Well then, I’m sorry, but could you please leave?”

Well, that sounds about right. If they can't talk because of me, then it'd be better for me to leave.

"Alright, then call me whenever once you're done."

As I was readying to get up, Yukinoshita stopped me.

"Wait. Where are you going?"

"Huh? Leaving…"

When I looked at Yukinoshita, she slowly adjusted her focus from me to Tobe and company.

"The ones leaving are them."

"Huh?"

Not only did I stiffen up, but so did Tobe and company. Regardless, Yukinoshita continued speaking.

"Lacking in manners and also the blatant rudeness; we don't have any reason to listen to the requests of these types of people. It's sufficient enough if they could just leave as soon as possible."

Her tone wasn't any different than usual and it was very like for her to be that composed. It's just that her expression was seemingly more coldhearted. With that freezing glare, Tobe was stiff in place.

"What a bad atmosphere…"

Yuigahama words accompanied Yukinoshita's seemingly dragging the situation out.

I wasn't sure if time had stopped, but my back was starting to kill me since I was still in my half-rising posture.

It's a pretty good time to decide who should get out now.

Why don't we all just call it a day and get out of here? Is that no good?

"…Well, we're the ones at fault here. Tobe, let's discuss it again. This is something we should figure out amongst ourselves."

Hayama said with sigh of relief, looking like he had given up. Yes, yes, please leave quietly.

However, it looked like Hayama's words triggered Tobe's release from his rigidity. Once he got back into motion, he started pulling at his hair again.

"Nah, I can't retreat now… Besides, I chatted with Hikitani during summer so it's all cool."

"…I see."

After seeing Tobe's firm resolve, Hayama backed off.

It was a little surprising since he didn't listen to Hayama after he tried to stop him, but this was the kind, noble, and justified Hayama. He may have tried getting in his way only to see how serious Tobe was. Originally, he was the type to push and cheer his friend on, so doing this much wouldn't have been odd at all. Bah, I don't get it.

I'm not sure whether he was being considerate or not, but it seems that it didn't get through to Tobe at all. Tobe was making a face as if he was trying to say something hard. Uuugh, if you don't feel like saying, can I go home?

"Um…"

Finally, Tobe's worry has been vocalized. Despite not being particularly interested in what he had to say, we all listened quietly.

"Ummm…"

Still not going to say it? Stop pulling our leg man. What, is this from a recent variety program or something?

Why are you replaying this CM so much? And just when it's about to end, you start at the beginning again. Are you in a time leap? Thanks to you, I wasn't able to watch anything other than anime.

"Um, the truth is, I…"

After an extremely long pause, he finally began speaking.

"About Ebina, I think she's pretty good, you know? So, at the field trip, I have something I want to do."

He began talking with some sort of coded nuance.

"Seriously!?"

Yuigahama's eyes sparkled. What I thought was similar to that as well.

Oh, I see, during summer, he wasn't joking after all when he said it at the camping trip in Chiba Village.

Since I had the information beforehand, I more or less understood the implications of this conversation, but Yukinoshita tilted her head with a puzzled look.

Because she looked like she had no idea what was going on, Yuigahama whispered in her ear.

Yukinoshita nodded while listening and when she finally grasped the situation, she stopped. After that, with a complicated expression, she tilted her head again. For now, I decided to confirm the important points of this conversation.

“Basically, it’s that. You want to confess and then go out with Ebina, is that about right?

When I spoke these words that were normally a little embarrassing to boys at the age of puberty, Tobe brushed his hair while turning towards me and pointed at me.

“Yeah, yeah, exactly like that. Getting turned down would be pretty bad, after all. You’re a real help in getting to the main point, Hikitani!”

What a sudden change in attitude… Well, I suppose it makes sense for this kind of guy. He started talking to me randomly during the camp trip during summer too.

Still…

“Haa, you don’t want to get rejected…”

Stop saying those naïve things. So once I get started on this meaningless job, you’ll get rejected; you’re saying that’s my job? *

As I continued with my stupid thoughts, I used my right arm as a pillow and leaned on the table.

Yukinoshita entered my vision and slightly bewildered, she placed her hand to her mouth and was thinking of something.

There was one person that ate up the story and that was Yuigahama.

She made a ruckus as she rose from her seat and she looked like she was ready to put herself out there with an air of interest. Her eyes shined due to the sudden mention of a love story.

“It’s totally okay, like, that stuff is totally okay! I’m rooting for you~!”

On the other hand, Yukinoshita was engrossed in thought.

“What exactly do you do to go out…?”

That from the get-go huh… Is what I thought, but I, too, do not understand. Maybe, fencing[10]?

The two looked like they were ready to take him up on his request, but I was not on board with it.

He was doomed from the start for trying to get people to cooperate with him.

In the upper grades of elementary school, this kind of topic tended to be the main subject of gossip, but I’ve yet to see a time where having people cooperate led to success. It was usually something of interest and that was that. There were also cases where asking for advice led to a gag against you. Another one would be where they never planned on helping in the first place, only to either use it as a means to threaten when they got in a fight with you or as trading material to learn

about who likes who. Dear lord, one mustn't underestimate information warfare in elementary school.

Therefore, I did not want to help or cheer him on. That is, it just brings up bad memories and stuff.

When I made a sour face, Hayama, with a similar and bitter smile, turned to me and spoke.

"I guess it won't be that easy huh."

"Well, yeah…"

I wasn't expecting that response and averted my eyes. When I did, my eyes met with Yukinoshita's.

'Well?' was what she was telling me with an inclining head.

'Nope, no way…' was the meaning I concentrated on conveying and with my eyes rotting one tier higher, I slightly shook my head.

'Okay…' was what she seemed to say and with a small nod, she opened her mouth.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think we'll be of any help here."

"Yep."

Right, we're done here.

"…I see. Well, that seems about right."

Hayama nodded as if he was convinced and stood there quietly staring at his feet. It seems that the people who come here for advice and the people whose position barely changes, and possibly even Hayama, think that we can solve every little problem.

In this world, things that are possible to do are fewer in number than things that are impossible to do and this is the law. Unfortunately and regrettably, I won't be of any use here. Um, I mean, it's really unfortunate, okay. I do not have a girlfriend so, yes, it might be too, um… difficult of a problem, I believe.

However, there was a person who wasn't convinced.

"Eeeh, c'mon, let's give them a helping hand."

Yuigahama grabbed at Yukinoshita's blazer and tugged at it. Yukinoshita, who was stuck in a rut, glimpsed at me and when she stared at Yuigahama, she then turned to face me.

Hey, wait a second, don't make me be the judge here… I just replied in the negative earlier too, damn it.

As if he had understood the meaning of the glances, he took a step forward. And with a broad smile, he faced me.

“Hikitani, no… Mr. Hikitani, lookin’ forward to yer guidance!”

No, no, no, you may look polite turning around like this, but it’s actually quite rude. You even got my name wrong.

“Yeaaah, Tobe kept saying this stuff and all.”

“We’re beggin’ you.”

Oooka and Yamato were encouraging him while laughing. Every time, I’m stuck in the minority.

“Yukinon, Tobecchi looks like he needs some help.”

“…Well, if you’re that adamant about it then, let’s do some thinking for a bit.”

With Yuigahama’s teary-eyed persuasion, Yukinoshita capitulated. Hey there, Miss Yukinoshita, aren't you being awfully too nice to Yuigahama recently?

With that being said, complaining and crying “no, I don’t wanna” won’t get me anywhere. No matter when and where, I’ll always be in the losing minority. While the minority’s opinion may be respected, it won’t ever be anything more than that. I studied that in social studies class in elementary. Guess I’ll have to fold here.

“Then, let’s do it…”

“For real, thanks man. Miss Yukinoshita and Yui, thanks a bunch!”

Hey, me. Me, man. …What about me?

Well, whatever. It’s not like I’m doing this for your gratitude. I’m doing it because it’s my job.

And so, since I’ll be doing it, I’ll just do it reasonably well, nothing more, nothing less; that’s my motto. I won’t put in all my effort, but I’ll at least try a little to make it a passing effort. This is exactly what I achieved from the recent Culture Festival Action Committee. I’ll do enough so I don’t get beheaded by the masses.

“Whatever, it’s fine… So, what exactly do you want us to do?”

“Ya know, like I said. I’m gon’ confess ya know? Maybe some sorta support?”

The moment Yuigahama heard “confess”, she ‘eeked’ in response with her hand to her lips followed by a long breath. Sure, get excited on your own but I doubt this will go well at all. Anyway, I asked specifically for some details, so give me some details.

“For now, I understand what you’re feeling. On the other hand, I can also say that’s the only thing I get. But, you know Tobe, you’re going off on about it, but you do know it’s a risky move on your part, right?”

After I spoke, Tobe stopped pulling on the hair at the back of his head.

“Risky? Aah, yeah yeah, risky, right. Risky.”

I don’t think this guy understands what that means… I’m not talking about cats jumping straight at their food, you hear me? Nor am I talking about the pet name of Littbarski who was on the JEF team long ago, okay?

Tobe’s level of comprehension was doubtful, but putting that aside, Yuigahama was doubtful and suddenly turned towards me and asked me.

“What’s risky?”

“Risk. The possibility of being exposed to danger or loss.”

Yukinoshita explained away like a Pokedex.

“I know what it means! I’m asking what the risks are!”

Yukinoshita looked at Yuigahama with a refreshing expression. I do suppose this is her little way of teasing her…

Anyway, after hearing what needed to be heard, I’ll bless him with the sympathies of society. This is where I should explain from the top down.

“Well, first you’ll confess? Then, you’ll get dumped?”

“It’s already decided that he’ll get dumped!?”

“Fool, that’s not the only thing. Everything beyond that will be decided too.”

Yuigahama was a little too quick with her surprise. That was merely the beginning. For the people that are rejected, there lies even more beyond that. No matter how far at the bottom you may think you are, there is a bottom within that bottom and that’s life. Indeed, I can continue to sink to the bottom no matter how far I go…

“On the next day after your confession, everyone in class will definitely know about it. It’s fine if they only know about it. But… you’ll be able to hear it every now and then.”

『Yesterday, apparently Hikigaya confessed to Kaori.』

『Uuugh, that sucks for Kaori…』 What do you mean ‘that sucks’…

『I heard he did it by text too.』

『Say what, that’s so scary. Then again, isn’t that just, like, unbelievable to confess by text?』

『Riight?』

『I’m glad I didn’t give him my number.』

『He won’t confess to you, don’t worry (lol).』

“『Hey, that’s totally mean, you know (lol)』 or so how the pleasant chatty jokes would go and it just so happened that I overheard it and it hurt a little.”

This was truly the final blow. While you’re stricken with grief over your broken heart, society tries to kill you off as a bonus.

“Another one of Hikki’s stories…”

Yuigahama let out a small voice. Is there any point in saying that? There’s no way I’d know about anyone else and because of that, most of my stories revolved around me.

Aah, not good, not good. Once I got started, I ended up taking a long time. Pheew~, so tired lol.

Everyone was completely quiet as if moved by my passionate speech.

“…Get it?”

When I reminded everyone, Yukinoshita tapped her forehead and sighed.

“...Isn’t that just because it was you?”

“Nah, I dare say I’m someone chock full of experiences back in middle school, I think…”

However, it seems that Tobe didn’t have that kind of experience. My explanation seemed futile as he looked like he barely grasped the meaning of what I said.

“Alrighty, alrighty, I should be fine as long I don’t confess by text. Besides, I’m like the type to take anything in stride.”

Tobe promptly pointed at himself with his thumb and the nearby Oooka and Yamato who went with Tobe’s flow cheered him on.

“Confessing directly, Mr. Tobe, you’re a so cool!”

“A true man…”

“Nah, being a man means doing this much, yo.”

They kept on going, but I’d like it if you could stop blushing… I don’t want to boot the blushing Tobe off his high horse, but these risks aren’t the only ones.

“…Well, that’s not the only problem.”

“There’s still more…”

Yuigahama interjected with an exasperated attitude.

“Obviously, there’s a bunch left. Like for example, the good relationship between you two after you confess.”

“Now, now, we understand already.”

As if trying to comfort me, Hayama tapped my shoulder and chipped in.

“…We get it, so we’ll try to manage.”

After he said that, the only thing I could do was nod in silence. Unlike me, Hayama should be able to steer this in the proper direction. I don’t think I’ll need to worry.

However, when he raised his eyes, his expression was different than the usual Hayama. He looked in the direction of the three idiots with a painful smile.

“Well, I have club, so I’ll leave the rest up to you… Don’t stay around too long, Tobe.”

Hayama left the room as he said that.

“Ah, guess I’ll go too.”

“I got club too.”

Ooka and Yamato followed right after. It seems they only decided to accompany him and had no intentions of discussing what to do with us together. This is what they call dumping your load on someone.

“Roger, roger, I’ll be right after you.”

After a heartily gesture to the other two, Tobe turned to us.

“Sooo yeah, best regards yo.”

‘Best regards’ to what. If you’re giving your best regards, the only thing that reminds me of is grief and the Mechanical Doctor. Or maybe it was farewell tears! Best regards courage!

“With that all being said, what should we do…”

Looking lost, Yukinoshita murmured with a sigh.

Indeed, for this kind of lovey-dovey talk, we don’t have the know-how means to solve it. Maybe you consulted with the wrong people. There’re plenty of other people who could help you out with this.

“Tobe, why did you come to us for this request?”

“Hm? Ya know, it’s that. Hayato suggested and pushed me here, ya know?”

“I don’t mean that… Isn’t this stuff exactly in the ball park for Hayama?”

When I said that, Tobe slightly glanced downwards.

“Nah, you see, how should I put it, it’s that. Hayato’s a totally cool guy. He looks swell too, ya know? So he’s like the troubleless kinda guy…”

Tobe didn’t need to say it for me to understand. Although we’re poking at his pretty boy innocence, it’s a fact that people would get the impression that he doesn’t worry too much about things in life.

"I want to try my best to be super popular!" or something to that effect was ingrained in the atmosphere of those who look upon the pretty people and sharing each other's troubles might prove to be difficult.

Hayama accepts everyone, a good guy who can't help but accept them. He's such a good guy to the point that I'd go "hooh".

He sports simple facial features and he has refreshing qualities, not just in appearance, but in conduct as a person as well, so it does make me think that there isn't anyone who could hate such a guy.

But, that's exactly why. It's because there's nothing to hate about him that people end up distancing themselves from him. Without any room for refusal, his perfection as a human is already a weapon in itself.

In regards to Yukinoshita Yukino, she was essentially equal to Hayama. However, fortunate or unfortunate, Yukinoshita has that kind of personality. She was the owner of perfect specs that went to waste in her speech and conduct.

Nevertheless, even if you include that, Hayama was still perfect.

It wasn't just his appearance, but also his manners around others, his ability to think on his feet, and his overabundance of emotions. There'd be too many things to say if you told me to list out his admirable qualities.

And it's exactly because of this that being in his proximity is a form of torture.

When comparing yourself to him, the part of you that becomes conscious of his qualities that surpass that of your own, regardless of whether you agree or not, gets hurt.

That's why, if I were to give you the list of faults of Hayama Hayato, it would be the person himself.

I can understand this as an outsider. I imagine those who are closer to him have a higher level of understanding than me.

Again, Yuigahama showed a smile that looked slightly bitter.

"Yeah… Hayato definitely doesn't look like he'd have a lot of problems."

"I know right?"

While Tobe made agreeable responses, Yukinoshita nodded. And then, with a suddenly brilliant smile, she faced towards me.

"I see, so that's why you came to Hikigaya for help."

"Hey, you're making it sound like I'm an experienced victim of love affairs."

Yukinoshita was making such an amazing expression that I couldn't help but make a retort.

But, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama subtly averted their eyes.

“…Hm.”

“Aah…”

Yukinoshita let out a short, sympathizing sigh while Yuigahama exhaled as if she was convinced. With that, both of them were silent.

“Could you stop being so quiet while looking away… Things will just get more serious otherwise.”

In the middle of my tension dropping, Tobe patted my shoulders.

“Well, so that’s how it is. I’m countin’ on you, Hikitani.”

…Like I said, you’re getting my damn name wrong.

Chapter 3

Tobe Kakeru is completely shallow in every way possible

On the very next day after accepting Tobe's request, we planned to analyze the details of the request and develop a plan for the upcoming days.

Quite frankly, the request was full of things that made me want to drop it then and there.

After all, the worries and love stories of complete strangers were anything but laughable and the individual who came for advice was Tobe. Putting in some effort might be harder than I thought.

Let's summarize the contents of the request.

Tobe will confess to Ebina and we will act as his support.

The hell is this… The contents of the request sounded exactly like those fluffy, energetic slogans when new chocolate candy went on sale.

As such, after accepting the request yesterday, what we'll be doing depends on what we figure out today.

Yukinoshita was shuffling around a stack of paper in her hands and faced us.

"Now then, let's confirm the standings from the current situation. Once we collect the information we need, we can start thinking of a solution."

Hoho, a very Yukinoshita-esque thing to do. But, as dictated by sports manga, data collecting characters were usually confirmed as ones who were destined to lose so it was a little concerning.

"First, we'll start off with some information from Tobe."

"Hm, right. It's basically what the ancient people of the past used to say, 'know your enemy, know thyself, and give up on all hundred battles'."

"Giving up already…"

Nah, we really should give up at this point… I mean, like, this guy's not good at all.

I sighed partly through and glanced over at the guy sitting off to the side.

"Well then, a brief introduction if you will."

Yukinoshita prompted the boy who smiled in return.

"Alrighty. I'm Tobe Kakeru from class 2F. Member of the soccer club."

After school, Tobe came to the service club in an upbeat demeanor, sat down, and participated in our discussion. Well, since we're asking the person himself, that confidence would make the conversation quicker.

"Is your soccer club going to be fine?"

"All good, all good. All of our seniors already retired, so right now, Hayato's the club leader so it's totally ezpeez."

You're totally looking down on a lot of things aren't you, ufufu.

"Let's look for Tobe's attractive features. If we can get them across to Ebina in an effective way, I'm sure she'll think on it seriously."

Beep beep beep beep boooop.

Individual thinking time continued in silence until Tobe suddenly voiced an "ah" and raised his hand. Yes, Tobe. Go ahead and say it.

"…Hayato's bud."

"So quick to rely on others…"

As if she was on the verge of giving up, Yuigahama murmured.

Well, if you're told to list out your good points, I'm sure trying to list them out would probably be quite hard unless you're me; I have a ton of good points and I'm also an amazing person.

In any case, it'd be best to hear the thoughts of the person watching him up close.

"Yuigahama. Got anything?"

When asked, Yuigahama assumed a pondering gesture with her arms folded. And as if she thought of something, she clapped her hands.

"Umm, he's bright, I guess?"

"If all it took to be popular was being bright, baldies would be at the top of the food chain."

It wouldn't be odd for light bulbs to be well-liked either. But, if I think about it, since Pikachu is really popular, then wouldn't having a head shaped like a Pikachu net you some popularity? I guess not.

With that being said, the fact that she was so close and couldn't spot a thing could mean that there was something else. In that case, it might be better to see if we can get any hints of favorable traits from his impression afar.

"Yukinoshita?"

"Let's see…"

Yukinoshita nodded in thought and placed her hand on her chin.

“Loud… No, fussy? Noisy… Maybe energetic, I suppose.”

She was grinning at the end, but everything up to that point exposed how her thought process worked.

“…Alrighty, I totally got it.”

I totally got it that this guy has absolutely nothing worth praising. Yukinoshita looked like she was unsatisfied with my reaction so she took a stab at me.*

“Why don’t you think of something?”

“Nah, thinking of stuff that doesn’t exist is just, you know.”

“What doesn’t exist is your motivation, isn’t it?”

I’m pretty sure what doesn’t exist is my interest in Tobe.

And so, I decided to stay quiet because I felt a little bad for him. I’m more than confident that I don’t have any interest at all, so this might be more trouble than it’s worth conversely.

But, well, we won’t get anywhere if we just keep saying nothing exists. So I thought a little harder. In this case, my thinking here ≒[11] cover-up.

In the first place, I knew absolutely next to nothing about Tobe. I mean, I only just learned that his first name was Kakeru moments ago.

Anyway, Tobe’s specs are, is what I’d like to say, basically those of any guy around.

As far as Hayama was concerned, Tobe gave off a bad impression from his appearance, but he was actually the best at setting the mood and was a good guy.

But, in Yukinoshita’s case, she classified him as incompetent, loud, and a demonstrative individual.

Well, my assessment was more or less the same. Particularly, if it wasn’t for his episodic talkativeness, he’d have absolutely no presence and, without a doubt, he’d be included in the Mob of the Extras.

Any further impressions of the person called Tobe would likely be stem from his outer appearance.

However, currently, I know more about Tobe than when I did back at the beginning of our second year where I could only see Tobe as one of Hayama’s followers.

After all, we went through that one hot, summer night together under one roof. That’ll definitely invite some uncomfortable misunderstandings, but regardless, we did go to camp together. So let us make some conjectures from that experience.

He wants to be popular so he tries to show off his stuff and when he wants a girlfriend, he acts accordingly and finally, if his friend ends up falling in love with someone, then he'll get jealous of him.

He was that kind of person.

That wasn't a good reference at all. He's what you'd call boy A, found anywhere at any time.

At the very least, I thought Tobe was the most normal, generic, and average, common fellow around here.

I'd like to think I'm a very sensible person and on behalf of the good conscience of Chiba (self-proclaimed), I'd also like to think that I'm a normal high school student with good sense, but even the slightest mention of Tobe's normalcy would cause me to back off.

In other words, Tobe's existence was very close to being worthless.

Even with this comprehensive analysis, I couldn't think of one good thing about Tobe. I couldn't think of anything, but Yukinoshita and Yui were giving me glances telling me to hurry it up while Tobe looked at me full of expectation saying "you'll totally tell me something good this time, yeah?".

"Tobe's good points… Or actually, why don't we try to match with Ebina's preferences instead since it'd be faster. You know, like, maybe that kinda guy that she's weak against; I'm sure she has something like that, probably."

For someone like me who wasn't exactly in the position to be discussing the merits of a person from above (modesty), I made a suggestion to shift the conversation in a different direction. It's definitely more constructive to think from a realistic perspective than thinking of things that don't exist, right!

"Oooh, I see."

Despite having said that in an unpleasant way, Yuigahama approved of the proposal. Good, good, I don't hate simple girls.

Yukinoshita also nodded with approval, looking convinced.

"So we should strike at her weak points. As always, no one can beat you when it comes to underhanded methods."

"That kind of praising is a little too weird…"

That totally didn't make me happy at all, just now. Just you praising me was already suspicious in the first place.

"So, how is she? Ebina, I mean."

Ebina was a gorgeous maiden and if we're talking about maidens, then she was at the age where she'd be head over heels in issues of love. If I use an analogy here, she'd be a super maiden like a flower. It was the natural course of things for maidens to amuse themselves with love stories.

I looked at Yuigahama with those expectations and she raised her face.

"Uuum… Well, in Hina's case… It's more like she's into guys liking each other than liking this kinda guy…"

…Well, you know, a Rafflesia is a flower too. Even if it rots, the quality is still there. Actually, it's exactly because it's rotten that we're talking about Ebina here.

"Nah, ya know, that kind of part of her is like, ya know? Like, a personal trait or an eccentricity is already decided and all, ya know?"

Oh, Tobe, that's admirable, you followed up properly. Love is blind or so they say.

But, since he properly followed up, this probably means he did hold some level of attraction to her. I mean, in my case, if someone spoke poorly of Totsuka or Komachi, I'd probably lose myself in my fury, so I suppose I'm feeling something close to that as well.

It seems that Yukinoshita had guessed at that feeling as well while watching from the side and nodded with slight admiration. But, she turned her head again.

"Putting Tobe's sentiments aside… What does Ebina think of Tobe?"

"I-I wonder?"

Yuigahama jerked at Yukinoshita's simple question. Whoa there, we have the answer already. Because it was too easy of a problem, deep down, I secretly bet my Super Hitoshi.

"Oh that ain't good, I better pump myself up for this."

Tobe suddenly got fired up and assumed a forward leaning stance.

"…You sure about this? This is basically that, you know, the final judgment."

"Nah, if we don't ask, we won't get anywhere, ya know!"

"I-I see…"

Well then, please present your answer Miss Yuigahama.

Yuigahama looked in our direction and the sound "ugu" blocked her words.

"…You're a good person, is what she probably thinks."

As she said that, Yuigahama quietly averted her eyes.

Guh… The tears are...

A good person.

First of all, to girls, “a good person” meant, with 100% probability, “I don’t care about that person”, and at best, it’d mean “a convenient person”.

In other words, this was completely hopeless.

However, Tobe was the one and only lone man who murmured a laugh with confidence in his victory.

“…This is, totally a plus point, ain’t it?”

The only plus point is your thought process… Or maybe it’s the screw in your head that flew off somewhere that gets the plus point.

I’d like to knock him down off his high horse with some words, but unfortunately, I couldn’t think of anything to say.

This guy named Tobe had surpassed beyond what I had imagined and was absurdly shallow.

“B-But hey, it’s a good thing if he isn’t hated, I think!”

Yuigahama was intent on trying to follow up on Tobe, but Yukinoshita and I were already set into give up mode.

“I think there’s a limit to what we can do here…”

“Yeah, there’s just too much of a gap between Tobe and Ebina.”

As you can see, Tobe being the demonstrative individual that he was, he was the thoughtless and facetious type of person. In contrast, Ebina was rotten despite how cute and tidy of a person she was.

But, in this case, Ebina was probably the irregular one here.

The so-called “conspicuous fujoshi” standing high up in the social hierarchy was pretty rare. In the case of the “hiding fujoshi”, they would unexpectedly keep to themselves in that hierarchy. Events for those types of fujoshi would consist of energetic and beautiful girls. *Source: manga. I read 801-chan and Genshiken, so there’s no doubt about it.

Originally, Tobe and Ebina should have been on different tiers of the hierarchy. Tobe would routinely stand out by being gaudy in his group. As for Ebina, her looks most certainly looked tidy and she was cute as well, but when compared to Miura, that defining “cuteness” gets overshadowed.

In light of popular opinion, Ebina was the type of girl that held the position that garnered thoughts like “this is the super cute girl that only I know about” and since she was content with being in the bottom group amongst the highest ranked groups, this led guys of the middle and lower stratum of the hierarchy to think “maybe, I could go out with her myself, yeah?”. Uh, if it was me in middle school, it may have been possible that I might have fallen in love with her.

However, the one who destroyed that popular opinion was our very own Big Sis, Miura Yumiko.

No matter where Miura was, with her flamboyant and cool personality, she would form groups with cute girls in her immediate vicinity. She disregarded the defining differences of “cuteness” and chose at her own discretion. Hm, if that was the case, it was a little mysterious as to why Kawasaki wasn’t included in that group. She even has a good face too. She’d be better off if she fixed her brocon tendencies and unsociability too.

So with the idea that Miura was one to create an environment undermining expectations, it was possible that she might be a key factor this time.

With that thought as a possible choice, Yuigahama recited Miura’s name.

“I wonder if we could get some help from other people, like Yumiko or something.”

“That’s right, they used to say it a lot back then. ‘If you want to shoot down their general, give up first’ or so.”

“You’re giving up again!?”

Once again, Yuigahama responded in surprise, but well, I do have a reason to give up this time.

“We’re better off just giving up… Besides, I doubt Miura would lend us a hand anyway.”

“U, uhmm… But, Yumiko really likes these kinds of stories though.”

“…Give it up.”

After I said that, Yuigahama gave me a surprised look.

That ended up sounding a little colder than it should have.

I think the chances of this request going well are pretty low.

And when it doesn’t go well, it wouldn’t be difficult to imagine Ebina learning of how Yuigahama and Miura had instigated it.

Regardless of the truth, that’s how the entire thing will be viewed.

If it was just Yuigahama alone, she’d have the excuse of the “service club”. As outsiders, I believe Yukinoshita and I could act as mediators and inevitably cover for Yuigahama.

However, if we include Miura, Yuigahama’s influence would even be more obvious. If it turns out that way, it was unlikely Ebina would hold positive feelings towards Yuigahama.

I sort of don’t want that.

What can be gained is outweighed by the number of risks.

“Well, for now, just take it easy.”

“Yeah… Okay, I got it.”

Yuigahama didn’t ask for an explanation. That’s a relief. I don’t think I could make a reasonable explanation anyway. It was just an emotional argument and having to apply some theory behind it would be stupid and troublesome.

“If that’s how it is, I guess we’re tied up here.”

Looking a bit tired, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh.

That’s right, the data we have now spells out a likely defeat. There was just nothing positive that could be found.

“Why don’t you give up now?

After I said that to Tobe apathetically, Tobe tapped his forehead and dropped his shoulders.

“Gaah. Hikitani, you are seriously toooough. Hayato was totally right about your bad mouth… But ya know, it’s that, right? The kinda character who says that stuff?”

“No, I’m being serious here though…”

But, he wasn’t listening to me at all. Tobe moved about exaggeratedly and looked my way.

“But ya know, it’s like what they say? The opposite of like is indifference. So basically, you’re totally looking out for me, yeah?”

T, this guy…

Talk about annoying… The level of annoyance is roughly the same as the vector pointing straight at Zaimokuza.

Besides, the opposite of like is hate.

The idea of indifference is by being ignorant, you can avoid evaluations altogether. If you wound up getting to know something, you can’t help but categorize it into something you like or dislike. When you categorize things into the group of things you hate, you’ll be stuck in an endless loop of hating it. Thus, the opposite of like is hatred, the intent to kill.

Tobe didn’t get what I was thinking and looked out the window and began talking bit by bit.

“I’m pretty serious here though… Yamato and Oooka are cheering me on and stuff but that’s only because they think it’s fun, ya know…”

Tobe stopped talking momentarily and looking embarrassed, flicked his nose.

“That’s why, it feels pretty good that you’re seriously trying to stop me Hikitani.”

“…”

That ain’t it. Don’t go making up absurd explanations for me, man. Like really, I’m totally serious. Could you stop please?

“Ebina too, she has somethin’ like that too. Sometimes, I like, get quick glances at her and it’s like, she isn’t what she looks like or so? That is totally cool. Aah, I’m soo gross for saying this embarrassing stuff!”

As if trying to brush it off, Tobe fluttered the hair on the back of his head.

Thanks for happily explaining things that I’m not listening to. Stop laughing refreshingly while twirling your long hair. Cut your hair.

But… how should I put it, he’s actually watching Ebina quite closely, this guy is.

I’m a man who went through life through just observation for a long time. That’s why I’ve, more or less, noticed that Ebina wasn’t just your run-of-the-mill cute girl from her appearance alone.

Even she has something she’s hiding deep down.

Tobe may not have fully understood that core issue, but having observed and sympathized with Ebina, he may have a clue about it.

And just like that, it began to poke at the back of his mind. Before he knew it, his eyes naturally began following her around and finally, he learned of a new side of her and his heart grew hot. That was the obvious development for anyone… It was the same for me as it was for Tobe.

Why are boys such dummies, I wonder? Even if it’ll totally go bad, that wouldn’t serve as a reason to give up. Boys are really dummies.

In the same way I was once long ago, Tobe was a guy in love. Whether he was a normalfag[12] or part of the top caste, he was just an earnest guy at heart.

“Well, you’re just no good from the start though…”

If you’re willing to put in the effort, then I’ll help you out. That’s the ideology that this club runs on anyway.

“Naah, juss help me out here so that doesn’t happen!”

Tobe lightly clasped his hands together. With gestures of telling him I understood, when he separated his hands, the sound of a cellphone vibrating could be heard.

“Ah, it’s for me. Wha’s up? …Eh, nah, my bad for real! I’ll be right there!”

Tobe closed his phone in a hurry and grabbed his belongings.

“What’s wrong?”

By the time Yuigahama had voiced out her question, Tobe was already running to the front door.

“I got club! Senior told me to get there or else it’d be bad if I don’t show up! Alright, laters!”

Tobe spoke quickly and dashed out the room leaving the door wide open. Yukinoshita stood there and after she saw him off, she murmured.

“He really is noisy…”

With Tobe gone, the room went silent.

Now that everything was calm again, boredom was starting to fill in. Each of us reached out for something nearby.

Yukinoshita began filling tea and I grabbed my paper book. Yuigahama rummaged through the magazine she had on hand.

Then, Yuigahama stopped. And as if she was going to consume it, she looked at a page intensely. She looked unusually serious so I peeked over to see why.

“For awhile now, you’ve been looking at something… Ooh, matchmaking.”

“I was just wondering if there were some good charms, um, for Tobecchi.”

Yuigahama answered without averting her focus from the magazine. And then Yukinoshita came in after having finished preparing her tea.

“In Kyoto, there are a lot of Buddhist shrines that put up charms and most tours revolve around that. But, praying to the gods is an oddly strange method…”

“That’s true, it’s like that one old saying. ‘Give god up when in trouble’ or so.”

Give up god and that’d be what you’d call give up giving god up. Giving up again, huh… It feels really lonely when no one gives me a retort.

And so as I was thinking, I looked at Yuigahama who, for some reason, had a glint in her eyes.

“…That’s it!”

“That?”

Giving up God, you’re fine with that? Personally, that phrase sounds really terrible so I can’t really get behind the idea.

“No, not that. There’ll be a good atmosphere as we walk around Kyoto! Like we can throw in some bean bits. Hina said she liked Kyoto too, I think!”

Bean bits. This basically meant trivial bits of knowledge. This is a beanful.

In other words, since the normal school life was out of the question, we could only expect to get something out of the field trip where the environment was different; something along those lines.

The plan for the field trip was three days and four nights. “How to make a lover in three days and four nights” or something like that was particularly evident in Western movies, but the main leads would consist of Cameron Diaz and Hugh Grant.

In any case, in the short time available, we need to create the situation where Ebina will find Tobe attractive somehow. Say what, is this an Impossible Game?

“So for that, first, we’ll need to make it so Tobe and Ebina are together.”

As Yukinoshita said that, she poured several servings of tea. Yuigahama grabbed her mug, drank it in one gulp, and raised her face.

“There’ll be no problem on the first day since we’ll be moving as a class. And I think the group will probably consist of me, Hina, and Yumiko.”

Sounds about right. Since that’s set in stone, they’d need one more person to fill the spot. I don’t think I’ll need to consider the influence that’ll have.

Next, if we consider Tobe, or so I was thinking until Yuigahama cut me off my train of thought with her words.

“Okay, so for the boys, it’ll be fine if Hikki is in the same group as Tobecchi. And if we choose the same place, we can go around together on the second day.”

“…Eh? No, I’m already grouped up with Totsuka.”

I waved my hands with nopes and nadas and there came in Yukinoshita with the support.

“Tobe’s already in a group of four. There isn’t any benefit for Hikigaya to barge in that group and no one would be happy either.”

Yukinoshita’s backup was something I should have been thankful for. But, I wonder why? I just don’t feel any sense of gratitude at all.

“Yeah, but if we think about Hikki’s plans and mine, on the second day, we’re gonna be roaming around anyway and it’d be better if there were two of us to provide support.”

Yuigahama continued the conversation with her theories. I stared at her in surprise due to this once in blue moon scenery. Consequently, I lost my timing to voice my objection to her idea… While I was silent, Yukinoshita nodded.

“I see. Well, since Oooka and Yamato took the time to come to the room, if we can explain it them, they should be on board.”

"Okay, when we're deciding groups, I'll go talk to them."

Not good, the conversation is proceeding further and further. At this rate, I'll be stuck with Hayama and his group of friends. I have to at least avoid that!

"Wait, listen to what I'm…"

As I was saying that, Yuigahama clapped her hands boldly.

"Okay, for the group distribution, we can break those four into groups of two and Hikki and Sai-chan can be in the same group?"

…Oh that's great. That's freaking great. Let's go with that.

× × ×

The class of 2F was much noisier than normal. It's likely that the primary reason for that was that our year had the Hayama Hayato and Miura Yumiko cliques that served as the center of the class. When those rowdy fellows gathered, it became natural to drown in laughter and show bright smiles.

That class of ours was one level nosier than usual today.

The reason for this was because of the group formation for the field trip. An hour was allocated from LHR, but in truth, group formation didn't really take up that much time.

People who were normally friendly with each other can instantly lock each other into a group. Now, as for why this hour was needed, it served as both kindness and torture for the loners. It was an allocated hour for those who couldn't decide who to group with and roam.

With Yuigahama conversing with Oooka and Yamato, their group of four broke up into groups of two, and the group of me, Totsuka, Hayama, and Tobe was formed. It was the original members from summer.

Now that most of the groups had finished deciding, the time for relaxing chit chats began.

Nearby was Yuigahama's group who was in the middle of final adjustments.

"We just need one more."

When Yuigahama spoke, Miura twirled her curls and answered.

"Can't we just settle for us three?"

She must be tired from trying to make a group of four. Ebina tapped Miura's shoulder from behind who was naturally disposed to breaking the rules.

"Heyloo~!"

"Ah, Hina. About the group of four…"

Yuigahama and I turned our head in response to Ebina's voice.

When we did, Ebina brought a figure that was beyond our expectations.

"How about Sakisaki coming with us?"

What is with that mah-jong-like name full of strength? When Ebina called her by Sakisaki, Kawasaki squirmed in embarrassment.

"I-I don't really… Stop calling me Sakisaki."

"If it's okay with you Kawasaki, why don't you come along with us? …Ah, we're gonna be going around with those boys over there so if you don't mind that either."

As Yuigahama explained, she looked over in our direction.

"Ah, I see."

The one answered wasn't Kawasaki, but Ebina. She directed her gaze our way. That glitter in her eye was terribly sharp. She was diligently observing our group.

"Are you really sure going with the boys?"

When Kawasaki asked, Ebina responded. The stare she had directed on us was already gone and Ebina was in a state of excitement, letting out gurgled moans.

"Sure thing, sure thing, we getta see all the Hayama x Hikitani up close all we want! We'll be able see the HayaHachi in Kyoto!"

So she was watching us for that reason huh, this girl…

"What are you saying? Besides, Hikitani is…"

Kawasaki said with a fed up tone and snuck a glance at me. And at an incredible high speed, she flicked her head back to her original position, staring at Ebina.

"Hi-Hikitani means that? N-no way, no way, no way!"

"Ohoo. It's okay, at first, no one would imagine that kind of couple existing, but when you're looking, it's the only way to go! Or that's how it'll boil down to. In truth, whenever Hayato gets self-conscious, he would give him a dreamy look."

"Who cares about that Hayato!"

At the moment Kawasaki said that, immediately behind her was the sound of a clanging chair.

"Ha? What'd you say?"

Suddenly, the air became tingly. It looks like she touched up on the wrath of Queen Miura.

She was tapping at her desk with a challenging attitude.

But, Kawasaki in her own way went into battle mode and while brushing her ponytail aside, she turned her head and glared at Miura.

The one who shot the gun first, in the same way she did to Yukinoshita, was Kawasaki.

“I said who cares about him. Maybe you should clean out your ears sometimes?

“Ha?”

“Ah?”

Final battle, final battle, the ultimate final battle! Freaking scary, like really…

“N-Now, now. A-Anyway, so let’s go with this group…”

Yuigahama barged into the middle and tried her best to keep the head butting at bay.

Aah, I see. Even though Kawasaki’s face is really cute, I get why she wasn’t in Miura’s group. Their sensitive personalities would end up clashing.

I don’t really want to go with these guys on the field trip…

Chapter 4

With all that's been said, **Ebina Hina** is still rotten?

Tomorrow was finally the day of the field trip.

We held one last meeting in the service club's room before having to leave for the trip.

Forming groups went smoothly the other day and the initial plan to set up the situation so that Tobe and Ebina would roam around together was a success.

That said, I thought it wouldn't have made any difference regardless of whether we helped or not because it would have happened naturally, but well, that was in regards to the difference that would have resulted whether I was there or not. It's not like anything would have changed even if I was present.

Now, we had to figure out a plan that would enable Tobe to show off his charm to her. We'll make a star out of Tobe. He'll be a star! Mr. Producer!

And so, information from various places such as Jalan, Rurubi, Tabelog, and even Gnavi were prepared so we could do some research for recommended hotspots.[13]

"Well then, let's get to thinkin'!"

With a flash of surprise, Yuigahama laid out various sightseeing guides and travel magazines on the table.

"Where the heck did you get all this from…?"

"Eh? Some of it was brought in by Yukinon, some borrowed from the library, and some from Miss Hiratsuka."

Putting aside the first two, what's with the last person? That person is totally looking forward to this trip, isn't she…? Well, nothing wrong with that.

In fact, I was actually looking forward to Kyoto myself. It would've definitely been more fun had it not been a field trip.

In any case, I flipped through some pages of the nearest magazine. Still, what's with this magazine? The pages were plastered with reddish and pinkish girly colors. Don't you have any cooler, darker traveling magazines like the "One-Man Trip ~Kyoto Edition~" or the Brave 10 Conspiracy Edition or even a Reminiscence Edition or something?

Anyway, I glossed over the major famous tourist spots and ignored the gourmet information that occasionally popped up in between. I'm feelin' the flow here![14]

Originally, we were supposed to create these plans with all of the members in our respective groups. Instead, Yuigahama, in the girls group, and I, in the boys group as a volunteer, as if the hand of fate had dictated so, would act out a production in such a way: “Oh, our plans are the same, what a coincidence!” But, lil ol’ me doesn’t think anyone would fall for something like this…

“If we bump into each other like this, it’d be like destiny or something!”

Yuigahama blurted out, but there wasn’t a chance in hell that’d happen. What are you, a romantic? Please stop! Stop being so romantic! Besides, since we were able to move as we pleased, if we were to bump into girls, we’d end up thinking “oh crap, I’d better follow them in a way that wouldn’t make them suspicious of me!” We would then purposely run ahead of them and take an unplanned detour onto another route. Damn it, don’t take us boys’ self-awareness lightly!

But, Yuigahama, who had not understood even a third of a high school boy’s naiveté, continued chatting away while spreading out the travel magazines.

“What’s a good place to go to~…”

Yuigahama muttered and flipped through the pages of a magazine without paying any particular attention to the publicized content. I feel like I’ve seen this reading speed somewhere.

The way Yuigahama read her magazines with her earnest feelings was very like her. This was in complete contrast to Yukinoshita who looked like she read every single character in a book.

“I suppose… We're still in the middle of autumn when we get there so Arashiyama and Toufukuji would be good places to go to. If we walk to Toufukuji, then there’s also Fushimi Inari nearby as well…”

“That geographic detail… You… have you been there before?”

When I asked, Yukinoshita had a puzzled expression.

“No, I haven’t?”

“So you went out of your way to look it up?”

“I’m researching it because it’s my first time going there. Everyone’s coming along too, so it’d be better if it was more fun, right?”

Yukinoshita smiled as she stated that.

Surprised by her awfully, optimistic words, I couldn’t help but respond with a listless grunt.

Yukinoshita had become softer than before. I’m sure Yuigahama had a big role in her change of heart and I don’t think that’s particularly a bad thing. It’s just, I’d be

thankful if you could be softer in a way I could understand. Your words up to this day have been pretty sharp, yeah, yours.

“Ah, look, look Hikki. This looks like a power spot.”

“That’s just a place you want to go to…”

As the three of us each looked through the magazines while making trivial talk, there was a sudden knock at the door.

It was a very reserved knock, so we couldn’t help but miss it the first few times.

Knock knock, knocks kept coming.

“Come in.”

The master of the room, Yukinoshita, called out towards the door.

“Excushe mme.”

The person fumbled over her greeting while slowly opening the door.

It was one girl that had entered the room.

Her black hair drooped down to her shoulders and she had glasses with a red frame. You could see her eyes through the transparent lens of the glasses and both her facial features and her entire body were small in stature. If she was sitting at the counter in the library, it’d make quite an impressive painting.

“Oh, it’s Hina.”

The chair made clunking noises as Yuigahama stood up. When she did, Ebina noticed Yuigahama.

“Hey, Yui. Haroharo~.”

“Yahallo~!”

…Eh, what the, is that a greeting from some tribe out there? Maybe Miura, the person who had to deal with this, was actually a wise sage after all.

“Yukinoshita and Hikitani too. Haroharo~”

“Hello.”

I greeted her back with a NHK character-like response while Yukinoshita did so in a calm manner.

“It’s been awhile. Please sit wherever.”

Ebina sat in the nearest seat as advised by Yukinoshita. She curiously surveyed the room.

Ebina spent time with us during the summer camping trip and also cooperated with us in solving a problem there. She should have been aware of what this service club does, if at least partially.

“Hmm, so this is the service club, huh.”

She nodded and looked in front of her abruptly, focusing her attention on Yukinoshita.

“I had something to discuss, so I came here…”

So you’re here for a request. What Ebina wanted to discuss piqued my interest. I didn’t think she was the type of person to worry about a lot of things or ask others for help. She gave off a very low-profile impression.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama seemed to be on the same wavelength as me and so, we straightened ourselves and assumed a serious posture.

“U-um, you see…”

When we focused our attention on her, she averted her eyes with blushing cheeks. Regardless, she prepared herself to say the things that needed to be said.

“I have something to discuss about Tobecchi…”

“To, Totototobecchi!? Wh, what, what!?”

It was natural for Yuigahama to latch straight onto those words. Just a few moments ago, or I should say the past few days, Tobe’s worries, or to be more specific, Tobe had been flaunting his feelings for Ebina.

I was particularly interested in what Ebina had to say about Tobe, especially considering her reserved behavior.

As we focused our stares on her, Ebina grew even redder.

“Um, i-it’s kinda hard to say but…”

Ebina had a down casted look and twiddled with the ends of her skirt that was the focus of her sight as she searched for words to say. U-Um, t-this is a bit hard to say but… I can’t help but look your way when you’re doing that so I’d like it if you could stop doing that.

Putting that aside, for that energetic Ebina to be acting so embarrassed and be at a loss for words, what exactly did she want to talk about?

…D-Don’t tell me, is this Tobe’s great victory? I definitely won’t allow this.

“About Tobecchi…”

“What about Tobecchi!?”

Yuigahama made a super quick response as if trying to move the conversation along and Ebina looked like she had prepared herself for the worst. After taking a small breath, Ebina boldly opened her eyes and hit us with her true feelings.

“Tobecchi, recently, has been, like, totally getting along too well with Hayato and Hikitani, so Ooka and Yamato are suuuuuuupeeeer frustrated! I want to see a more hot relationship! At this rate, it’ll be a total, huge waste of my Triangle Heart!”[15]

Waste! Waste! aste! ste! te! e...

Only Ebina’s voice reverberated throughout the silent room. We could only stare into the empty space, unable to say anything in response.

We were truly at a loss for words. And I’m not talking about five or seven syllable juejus here, but 0 syllable ones. You actually get band manga vibes from the word ZECK. [16]

The first one to start moving again was Yuigahama. For someone who was used to being together with Ebina, she was quick on the uptake with that sudden outburst.

“Erm… so, what do you mean?”

When Yuigahama inquired, Ebina nodded very deeply.

“Like recently, Tobecchi and Hikitani have been talking to each other a lot, you know? Also, the groups unusually different than usual and like they’d exchange these suggestive glances, gufufu…”

This Ebina who would cackle in the middle of her explanation was so frightening…

“Ah, not good, not good.”

After returning to her senses, Ebina wiped off the drool dripping from her mouth. Without Miura here to keep her on a leash, Ebina’s delusions would go wild it seems. I suppose Miura had some maternal instincts in her huh… There must be something wrong with Miura’s interests to be friends with Ebina and the not so bright Yuigahama. Today was the day I thought she was a little pitiful for putting up with them.

Or so I was thinking, but this wasn’t the time to be averting my eyes from reality. Ebina was still in the middle of her explanation. I urged her to proceed with a look. Acknowledging this, Ebina smiled pleasantly.

“I’m not sure why you’re so friendly so suddenly, but… I just kinda noticed there was this sudden distance between you guys and Ooka and Yamato.”

I can see where Ebina was coming from. Hayama's group of four was broken into smaller groups in such a way that allowed Totsuka and I to join up which was evidently unnatural. It was likely that our classmates besides Ebina also noticed this odd peculiarity.

"Ah, well, that's basically…"

How would one go about explaining this? For the time being, Ooka and Yamato were already convinced about the plan and I couldn't exactly explain this to Ebina, so I couldn't squeeze out any words.

However, Ebina shook her head as saying I didn't need to mention it to everyone.

"Hikitani. You see, if you're going to do the inviting, I want you to invite everyone. And then, I want you to take everything in. Frankly, I want you be to taking the invitations."

"No way… That's impossible…"

That sounded so full of despair that I instinctively shook my head in response. What followed was a feeling of hopelessness that was two levels higher. I almost felt like crying just a little.

As if understanding my shocked reaction, Ebina looked slightly dejected and wore a sad expression.

"I see… I guess so."

You understand now, huh…

"You're not an accepting bottom, but a hopeless bottom. I'm sorry for saying something so unreasonable." [17]

"No, no, no, that's not right, you're completely off base here."

This was beyond just trying to understand what was going on here. It wasn't just me. Yuigahama had a resigned expression as she sighed.

The only person who was still level headed was Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita closed her eyes while rubbing her temples and opened her mouth.

"So, what do you mean exactly…? I'd like it if you could explain."

With an exhausted expression, Yukinoshita put in the effort to try to get an explanation out of her. A girl who works her hardest was a wonderful thing. I've already given up on making heads or tails of the situation, so please try your best for me too.

"Hmmm, it's like, it felt like our group recently has been a little out of tune or so…"

Ebina's voice trailed off with anxiety.

Yuigahama followed up on Ebina to try to keep her relaxed.

“Oh, there’s that. As guys, Ooka and Yamato probably have something complicated going on you know, like guy relationships.”

“Complicated guy relationships… gosh Yui, you’re so dirty…”

“Did I say something weird!?”

“Nah, you said something proper. You’re fine.”

The one who wasn’t fine was Ebina. Why the heck is this person blushing?

“Well, there’s a lot going on. I can’t say I understand how people think. You can keep to yourself and it’d still be possible to stay on good terms.”

“That’s true. But, it feels like something’s different than usual. I don’t really want to leave it like that.”

Ebina smiled as she explained.

“I want to get along with everyone just like how it’s always been.”

She smiled without a hint of rottenness or ill will.

It seems that Ebina was content with her current relationships in class. This wasn’t just from the perspective of a fujoshi, but also from her current position as well.

Get along with everyone.

They were words that I detested, but there was no doubt there were people who wished for them. However, was it as simple as it seemed in the case of Ebina? I couldn’t get an exact reading of the person named Ebina Hina at all.

From just that alone, I end up wanting to dig into her words and guess at her real intentions.

…No, I’ll stop there. Trying to see if there was anything hidden under the layer of words was a bad habit of mine.

Again, when my face showed me breaking into that bad habit again, Ebina added “ah, but” to recollect her thoughts.

“If Hikitani is included in the group, then it’d be fine if you just got along. It’d be healthier for my eyes too.”

“I won’t bother with that so take care of your eyes more. In fact, go eat some blueberries or something.”

Your healthy eyes aren’t about my actual being at all, but my contact with someone else huh…

When I retorted, Ebina guffawed and stood up.

“Well, so that’s how it is. I’m looking forward to the delicious goodies on the field trip.”

Ebina looked like she was about to start drooling again, but she held it back hurriedly. She turned my way and winked.

“Hikitani, I’m counting on you.”

We saw off Ebina, who spoke those words to me, from the clubroom and exchanged glances with each other.

“What was that about…?”

Yukinoshita voiced the extremely obvious question.

“No clue. Well, we just have to help them get along as usual. Although, I don’t think we need to do anything since they seem to be getting along just fine as is.”

The group breakup was disguising the fact that it was for the fulfillment of Tobe’s love story. Actually, this conduct itself could be considered as a sign of their friendship.

Yuigahama, who looked like she understood that as well, nodded in agreement.

“That’s true. Besides, I don’t really get how guys get along together anyway... Hikki, how do guys get along with each other?”

Yuigahama asked her question, but before I could answer, Yukinoshita patted Yuigahama’s shoulder. And then, she wore a somewhat lonely expression.

“I think that’s a little too cruel of you to be asking Hikigaya that. Yuigahama, you should be a little more considerate, right? Okay?”

“You got that right. Be more considerate, you, that is.”

Isn’t that verbal abuse threading on kindness a bit more painful?

Whatever the case, tomorrow is the big day of the field trip. The service club’s current request was that of Tobe’s. That meant there wasn’t a single thing to be worried about.

Nevertheless, those words that were only for me echoed in my ears.

× × ×

I began preparing for tomorrow’s field trip after I got home.

Or so I said but the only thing I planned on bringing was spare clothes. Eh, was there anything else I’d need for the field trip?

I couldn’t really think of anything, so I just loitered in front of my drawers and pulled out random pieces of clothes at random. If I bring a good amount of pants and socks, I should be good for a few days.

Next were bathroom supplies… Don't they have these at the inns? Guess I'll bring them just to be safe.

With that, I was done and done. It only took one bag to fit everything I needed.

Kyaa! It's like I'm totally used to going on trips, so cool and dreamy! UNO, trumps, and mahjong; it must be tough for everyone to carry so much, huh. It was likely that there were people who brought their portable gaming handhelds so they were even more pitiful.

But well, in today's world, places that you travel to tend to have the basic necessities that you can obtain in case you missed something, even more so if you had a cellphone to look things up. Traveling's become quite convenient, but there's just something off about it.

I took out my prepared luggage to the living room and tossed it to the floor.

It'll be an early morning tomorrow so I decided to sleep early. The gathering place was at the Tokyo Station. We'll be heading to Kyoto by the Bullet Train.

If you're late, you'd be left behind.

Well, I could ride the Bullet Train by myself just fine and I could pick up calls whenever too. I suppose the ticket fare might sting a little, but couldn't I get that waived off somehow? Actually, we're the ones buying the ticket, yet we can't choose what time to depart, what's with that? Is there any love in that?

In that case, it'd be better to be late just so I could travel alone and take my time heading to Kyoto as I chow down on the train station lunches.

When I took that into consideration, I had the urge to abandon the thought of waking up early.

I dropped onto my sofa and just as I thought about whether I should drink some coffee (MAX), Komachi trotted in my direction. Please refrain from running in this small household.

"Bro, you forgot something."

She swung around a device that was attached to a strap as she said that.

"…Don't need a camera."

I won't get the opportunity to use it. If it's for scenery shots, there are plenty of them out there.

"How about the Vita?"

Again, she went through the trouble of putting the Vita in its case and attached a strap to it, waving it around.

"Vita-chan will watch over the house. Keep her company, Komachi."

“Roger.”

Komachi made an awfully meek expression when she nodded and proceeded to place my Vita-chan in her breast pocket... You are going to return that right? Ah, I’m just letting you borrow it, okay? This won’t be like those situations where the little sister borrows the older brother’s electronic dictionary and it ends up becoming hers after a while, right?

I put up with my feelings of wanting to confirm the ownership of my device and Komachi, who had no idea of my feelings, poked at her right cheek and turned her head.

“But, what are you going to bring then? Since you’ll be by yourself, you’ll need something to past the time…”

I’m happy that you’re watching out for me, but aren’t you underestimating your older brother too much?

“Ebooks are all the rage these days so I should be good.”

You’re looking down on me too much, little Komachi. If it’s regarding my class, just having a cellphone was enough to kill time; in fact, I could easily do it with nothing on me.

Your brother would play with his fingers in the middle of class and make these frogs that’d go “croak, croak” and stuff by himself, you know. I definitely can’t say this to my little sister!

“Also, I’m not going there to have fun.”

When I said so, Komachi had a dubious look on her as she listened.

“…Why are you going then?”

“To get a fill of mortification, I guess…”

Before I knew it, my sight grew distant. Every single time, whenever the guys who try to create good for nothing memories at the field trips fail, I could imagine a 72 hour silent endurance race. Of course, I’m the winner of that race.

Without thinking, I was engrossed in my past and grew silent in which Komachi popped her hands as if she thought of something.

“Oh, almost forgot. Here you go.”

What was handed to me was a white object. Underwear, hmm? Oh, it’s not underwear. It was a scrap of paper. Well, I wasn’t sure what I’d react if I was given underwear. Um, you know, like how maybe I should be considerate and react accordingly or something, that kind of meaning.

But, no matter how much of a dunce my lil' sister was, she seemed to be able to discern that much. With that being said, what she gave me was a piece of paper that was folded in a very girly way.

It was folded like a diamond or open blouse; the kind of folding you'd do to a paper you want to give to someone as you pass it to people in the middle of class.

In fact, that way of folding reminded me of my middle school days when I had to pass along a letter, unaware of the written insults of me on it, and wondered what I'd do if people started giggling in the back of the classroom. So I'd like it if you could stop folding it that way.

When I opened up the letter, the bright pink and yellow rounded handwriting that filled my eyes was like free roam Dragon Quest.

Komachi Recommendations! Souvenir List! Number 3! Cinnamon cookie dough! (From the main store, the inventors, or a branch shop; anywhere is fine.) Number 2! Oil absorbing paper from Yojiya[18] (Portions for mom as well.) Number 1! Tune in after the CM for the announcement!

…It was partitioned up in an irritating way.

"What the heck is with the first one…?"

"The number one souvenir is a story of bro's amazing memories."

Komachi giggled with a smile. Super cute…

"There's like a lot of marriage temples too, so if you get connected to someone, that's good too!"

"Stop with your meddlesome worrying and go study."

"Okaaay. Now, now, give my regards to everyone."

"Righto."

I think the amount of places I have to go around increased… Well, I can buy the cookie dough at the station... I know a little about the Yojiya oil absorbents so I could probably buy those at the station too.

So that means, the last place I have to go to is…

…Guess I'll go to the god of studies too then.

Chapter 5

As you can see, **Yuigahama Yui** is putting in the effort

Yo! I'mma Hachiman! I'mma about to go to Tokyo!

With that being said, the current objective was to head to Tokyo so we could board the Shinkansen.

I woke up earlier than usual so I could head out a little sooner. When I met with my parents before leaving, they asked me to bring home some gifts, this also including Komachi's list of requests. But you know, papa, right now I'm just a minor so I can't buy you any sake even if I act as a proxy in your place. However, I'll be glad to take the money that was meant to buy you some sake off your hands!

It was a short distance from Chiba to Tokyo. Actually, you could say Chiba was the closest prefecture to Tokyo. In other words, as the closest prefecture to the country's capital, Chiba's worth was that of a capital city so you might as well call it one. Amazing. Chiba's so amazing.

You could make it to Tokyo in one trip if you took the Sobu Rapid Line. Another alternative was the Keiyou Line. So fast. Chiba's so fast.

However, the two platforms for the Sobu Rapid Line and the Keiyou Lines at the Tokyo Station had terrible service. In the case of the Sobu Line, as you travel through a tunnel, you'd think "what the heck, are we going to dig for some oil or something?". In the case of the Keiyou Line, you'd think "you can't really call this the Tokyo Station anymore can you…[19] ?" Such was the difference in their positions. So far. Chiba's so far.

In that case, Shinagawa would have been a more convenient alternative albeit a bit farther when wanting to board the Shinkansen.

Just how deep in the sticks are you, Tokyo, to be this far from Chiba? Does that mean Kyoto that was even farther out a completely secluded region?

I casually boarded the local train at the nearby station and transferred over to the Sobu High Express Line from Tsudanuma.

I frantically boarded the train moments just before it was about to depart and sighed with relief when the door closed. I was glad that I managed to make it on time and just as I made a face of relief, my line of sight met with eyes that reflected the blue colored rays of water.

"…"

"…"

Both of us were silent.

The other party fluttered her blue ponytail and looked outside.

Kawasaki Saki. I earnestly muttered the name that I finally recalled.

Right, I remembered that her house was pretty close to mine. The middle school districts were different because of the interposition of the highway, but the closest station was the station in the neighborhood over. Since we were transferring from the rapid line, we were going to end up boarding the same train from the same line.

"…"

Kawasaki snuck glances in my direction. When our eyes met again, she abruptly flicked her head to the side and looked outside.

The hell…

I missed the timing to greet her and should I had chosen to get myself away from this position, the other party would have noticed and I would have been assaulted with feelings of being a loser, so I was in no position to move.

In the end, Kawasaki and I leaned against the door in our respective nudges for forty-five minutes until we arrived at the Tokyo Station.

When I got off the train, there were Sobu High School students who arrived here in their uniforms dispersed throughout the station.

It looked like everyone had met up and accompanied each other here beforehand. Hmph, not being able to come here to Tokyo by yourself makes you guys look like a bunch of country bumpkin kids. C'mon now, learn from me. I came here all by myself, you know? Wouldn't I be able to chase after my dreams and make it big in Tokyo at this rate?

I climbed up the never-ending stairs from the platforms and finally made it to the surface. While I said surface, I was still indoors and couldn't see the sun, the stars, the blue sky, and the moon… This was what they call the jungle of concrete.

In this parched capital, people were swarming all over. I'm already feeling nostalgic for Chiba. I wanna go home.

We threw ourselves into the human wave, our destination being the platforms for the Shinkansen. However, this human wave was at the level where I'd get scolded for the times I'd fall behind the pack.

At the mouth of the Shinkansen entrance was a staggering amount of students from my school and adding onto the fact that we were at the Tokyo Station, a hotpot for people, it was incredibly noisy. For this kind of station and for the lone man named Hachiman, if he were to say it in English, this situation would be called a Hotch Potch Station.

“Hachiman!”

From the groups of students came a voice calling out my name. I didn’t have very many classmates that called me by Hachiman let alone anyone that properly called me Hikigaya.

And the one person who poured all their friendly compassion into calling my given name was…

“Hachiman… The capital of the East is quite nostalgic, I dare say. It is the birth place of my soul. Refrain, refrain.”

…Oh right, this guy calls me by Hachiman too.

Zaimokuza coughed in a bizarre way and slowly approached me.

“Need something?”

“Humu, nothing of the sort. It’s just that my DS was cut short of its circuit rather quickly. I’m merely investigating for means to kill time.”

“Yeah, right. Rather, what’s with all that luggage? Planning to seclude yourself in the mountains?”

Taking a look, Zaimokuza was carrying a swollen duffel bag on his back. What in the world did he put in there?

Zaimokuza patted the bag on his back and pushed up his glasses with his middle finger.

“Indeed. I will be training my swordsmanship at Kuramayama.”

“Kuramayama huh. You chose a place pretty far off.”

Of course, Kuramayama was one of the many popular spots and since it was somewhat detached from Kyoto, it was also a pretty difficult place to go sightseeing.

“Indeed, indeed. Well, it was not a decision I made for myself, but an opportunity to train with the sir Tengus may serve as for some amusement.”

“You plan on going to Kibune too? After all, I’m sure it’s a lot more comfortable in its own way not having to decide it yourself, right?”

“No, you know. I properly told them of my desires as well. In this world, there is something what you would call a “store that we want to go to”. Never mind that, I would prefer if you brushed aside the setting I created and give me a retort. It is a bit lonely.”

Zaimokuza pouted and protested. Nah, I mean, remarking on your middle school disease setting would just be a waste of time and you’d probably just let it slip out your other ear anyway. I can’t be giving you that much service now.

“If you want to go somewhere, then just go. We’re finally out here and all, have some fun.”

“Humu. Where are you heading to, Hachiman?”

“Who knows, there’s some stuff going on. We haven’t decided where to go yet for the third day.”

“The third day was free roam, I believe. Rufun, you can accompany us to buy goods at the ‘store that we want to go to’ if you’d like.”

“Sounds good and all but…”

Going along with Zaimokuza is, you know, but it’s not like I’m opposed to shopping at all. However, there’s also the Service Club pending request that we had to deal with on the third day. It’d be better if I didn’t make any plans just yet.

“Guess it’s about time to gather up.”

“Solo time it is. Indeed! Well then Hachiman, let us meet again in Kyoto.”

“No, I don’t think we’re going to meet…”

After we went our separate ways, I searched around for the spot where my class would be meeting.

If I looked around near the edges of the carriages, there should be signs that indicated which group was which. When I scanned the area, I spotted a familiar face at a noisy corner.

It was Hayama and company.

Oh shucks! That was definitely my class over there.

Small groups formed an outline around the Hayama’s group, the core. They should just stay over there as they are in their circular group. I activated my shadow skill. When I use this, it causes the surrounding to not notice me but recently, it seems to have leveled up to the point that it’ll damage me in such a way: ‘You know that guy, he’s up in your business before you even realize.’ I seem to be getting noticed more often and this clearly means my aura is increasing.

Before long, it was time.

The group that was scattered all over the place quickly gathered in one place and formed a beautiful line.

After the class roll call, we then were admitted. Followed by a march. Is this sports day or something?

We also did roll call in our groups to check for everyone. From there, I was finally able to meet up with Totsuka. A chance meeting in space![20]

“Hachiman!”

This time, it was the real deal… How soothing…

“Morning, Totsuka.”

“Yeah, morning, Hachiman.”

I exchanged a few greetings with Totsuka and while we talked, our group assembled at the Shinkansen platform. The train that we were going to board had already arrived.

Every class boarded their respective carriages that were assigned to each of them.

The seats of the Shinkansen were organized in a very peculiar way.

Lined up in each row were five seats, sectioned off two by three. This setup made it difficult for groups of four to determine how they should be seated. You could split up evenly into groups of two, but in the case of a group of three plus a loner, the loner would be by himself barred from the seats of three by the aisle. Or in the case of three people, one person will be chosen as the human pillar and be stuck alone. In the former case, being left alone made it more comfortable for everyone, but in the latter case, the person who becomes fed up with being silent from the start begins to talk to the other two across the aisle, giving birth to an environment where no one would be happy.

Such was the Shinkansen that gave birth to such tragedies, but for this field trip, it was wise to choose how we should position ourselves.

Totsuka with me while Hayama with Tobe.

With this group of four in mind, this would be the correct way to divide ourselves.

But, this was a class event. This meant that various complicated factors would come into play. The first thing people would do was survey the seating arrangements before deciding on how they would arrange themselves. We were all aboard the train already yet people were glancing around looking for places to sit. This was a “I’ll lose this battle if I don’t act before they do…” situation.

“Oooh crap. Shinkansen or the airplane, it’s that kinda thing that gets you pumped up!”

In the noisy interior of the carriage shortly before our departure, Tobe eyed the surrounding as he trotted down the aisle.

“I’ve never been on an airplane before, yo.”

“First time for me on the Shinkansen here.”

Following the loose-mouth Tobe was Oooka and Yamato. Apparently, they decided to stick together since they were gathered up at the station anyway. There was also a pair of two guys in their group that were walking right behind them.

In addition to that, another group advanced down the aisle. It was the group of three buddy buddy girls and one loner: Miura, Yuigahama, Ebina, and Kawasaki.

“The window’s totally good for me.”

The very first words that came from the mouth of the blonde-hair girl with drills spoke of her desires. Acknowledging those words, the brown haired dough-girl began to coordinate the group.

“Okay, then I’ll be on the seat next to the aisle. How about Hina and the rest?”

When she moved the discussion to her, the black, bobbed hair girl pondered slightly before turning her head in the direction of the ponytail.

“Hmm… Saki, the window or the aisle… which do you think will take it?”

“It doesn’t really matter where I… huh?”

Saki was flabbergasted by the bizarre question while Ebina looked like she was about to break into a drool.

“Ebina, your mouth. Close it.”

Miura pushed up Ebina’s jaw. Yuigahama had a strained laugh as she watched their exchange.

The group of four girls had continued their conversation, nothing different from the usual. Glad you could make some friends, right Kawasaki. Your big brother could break into tears right now.

Whether he had noticed that the seating arrangements weren’t going to be finalized any time soon, Hayama passed through and called out with a calm voice that seemed like he wasn’t talking to anyone in particular.

“Why don’t we just sit wherever? We can move around in the middle of the trip anyway.”

As he said that, he picked the closest seat to him. He had chosen the window seat that was the center of three people.

“Oh, you’re right about that!”

The one who continued after Hayama was Tobe. He moved next to Hayama.

“Okay, I’ll be at the window then.”

When Miura said that, she maneuvered around towards the window seat across from Hayama. A befitting display of Miura; without an ounce of rejection from the audience, she moved of her own accord to the seat she had wanted.

“C’mon. Yui, Ebina.”

And then, she crossed her long legs giving off a feeling of gorgeousness, tapping at the seats, a signal to the two to come over. What's up with that invitation, that's like totally cool.

"Yumiko's over there, Tobecchi is there, and…"

Yuigahama murmured in a small voice that couldn't be heard by anyone and was thinking of various things. Before she could get her thoughts in order, Ebina pushed her along from her back.

"Okay, okay, Yui's over there. I'll be here."

"Wa— Hina!"

Ignoring Yuigahama's complaints, Ebina grabbed Kawasaki's hand and pointed in the direction ahead of her seat.

"Kawasaki will be right there."

"Wait, I could sit somewhere else…"

At that moment, Kawasaki made a face that said otherwise while shaking her head, but when Ebina tugged at her hand, Kawasaki sat down, unable to resist. She's surprisingly weak to pressure, this girl.

"No worries, no worries! ♪"

Ebina, who smiled at this, had forcefully dictated the seating order halfway through. As a result, Miura, Yuigahama, and Ebina were lined up on side while on the other was Hayama, Tobe, and Kawasaki, forming a sextet.

Having been unable to ward off the efforts to make her sit in the seat next to Tobe, Kawasaki radiated with displeasure and was readying a posture with her chin on her hands, ready to doze off. Eeeh, um, Tobe's scared out of his mind here, so could you just be a little friendlier please? Can you really call this a romantic comedy?

After acknowledging Hayama and company's whereabouts, Oooka and Yamato, along with the other two in their group, positioned themselves in the seats of four across the aisle.

When this happened, the entire class looked like they had settled for what seats to sit in.

While I looked upon the result of our current situation, something pulled at my sleeve with a feeling of restraint. Totsuka was glancing around back and forth and finally looked towards me.

"Hachiman, what should we do?"

Taking the full brunt of the innocence of that stare, I averted my eyes in embarrassment. At the same time, I decided to take note of the situation in the carriage.

“Well…”

In situations like this, those who were alone would quickly run off to the seats at the corners and it was a ritual for the others to treat that area as a place of confinement. Therefore, those who failed to make the first move were inevitably forced into looking for an open spot somewhere else on the train.

This time, Hayama was quick to choose a position directly in the middle causing the front and back to be relatively open.

“…Well, looks like the front’s open, so over there I suppose.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

As I started moving, Totsuka followed behind me without question. It wouldn’t be odd at all if he were involved in some crime because of this purity. I must protect him… As I held that feeling to my chest, I headed for the three seats at the front.

Since the very front was going to be crowded, we chose a row that was slightly detached from there. I placed my luggage on the shelf above. I didn’t have too much luggage so there was plenty of room left on the shelf. Well, shelving luggage above wasn’t going to be effortless regardless of it being one or two things.

“Here.”

I extended out my hand towards Totsuka, indicating to him to pass over his luggage so I could put it on the shelf, but Totsuka tilted his head curiously and slowly extended out his hand, grabbing ahold of mine for some reason.

It was so soft and so tiny and so smooooth…

“Er, I didn’t mean that, but your luggage…”

Scratch that, it’s not a handshake. Gosh, it was so smooth and refreshing.

“…Ah. S-Sorry!”

Totsuka realized his misunderstanding and let go of my hand frantically. With a completely flushed face, he looked down and with a small voice saying “thanks…”, he handed me his luggage.

I took his bag and placed it on the shelf. At this moment, I couldn’t help but want to latch onto Totsuka as he was. I wanna take him home~![21]

After I suggested to Totsuka, who was embarrassed by his misunderstanding, to take the seat next to the window, I sat in my seat as well.

As I did, the melody from the departing bell went off.

Departure on a fine day![22]

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I woke up from my deep slumber.

It might have been because I left home early, but it looked like I was hit really hard by the sleepiness.

As I stretched out, a giggling voice came in the direction of the aisle seat next to me.

“You sleep too much.”

“Blueah! Surprised me…”

I couldn’t help but straight up when a surprising voice called out to me.

“What’s with that reaction… Totally rude…”

With a pouty and displeased expression, Yuigahama glared at me.

“I mean, anyone would freak out if someone called out to you just as you woke up…”

Having your sleeping face seen by other people was really embarrassing, so please stop it. I instinctively wiped at my mouth to see if I was drooling.

As if I was doing something weird, Yuigahama cackled a bit.

“Don’t worry. You were sleeping really peacefully with your mouth closed.”

Good to hear. Yeah right. That’s embarrassing.

Actually, why is she sitting here anyway…? The hands of destiny had already determined that Totsuka would be the one beside me… And when I scanned around for Totsuka, a sleeping mumble could be heard in the direction of the window seat.

But, Totsuka woke up because of my raised voice, slightly moaning and he rubbed at his eyes lightly.

Kuh! What a blunder! In this situation, I would have slipped a ring on the sleeping Totsuka’s left ring finger and once he woke up, he’d rub his eyes only to notice the ring followed by my proposal. I went through the hoops just to prepare this strategy dubbed “When she wakes up… the diamond is of an everlasting brilliance” too! Hikigaya Hachiman, the blunder of a lifetime! I completely lost the chance to get married!

Using his hands to cover his mouth to hide his small yawn, Totsuka peeked around to get a grasp of the situation.

"…Sorry, I kinda fell asleep."

"Nah, no problem. You can sleep a little more if you want. When we get there, I can wake you up, er, want to use my shoulders?"

My knees and arms are fair game too.

"N, no way! Why don't you sleep a little more Hachiman, I'll wake you up!"

Ha ha ha, you're so cute, I get the feeling a lot of other things are going to wake up, you know.

If either of us can't decide whether to sleep or not, why don't we both hit the sack together? Or so that was the kind of atmosphere that we were making as Yuigahama let out a sigh.

"No, no, you two, you both slept too much. The field trip's only started and if you're already like this, what are you planning on doing later?"

"That's true, we should have more fun."

When Yuigahama said that, Totsuka looked a little more motivated. True, it was only the first day. It's a little too early in the game to be dozing off from fatigue.

That's what I thought, but it looked like the person in question, Yuigahama, was already a little tired.

"Actually, what's going on with you? Did something happen over there?"

Upon asking, Yuigahama slumped over.

"Well, you see… Yumiko and Hayato were behaving just like always… but because Kawasaki was in such a bad mood, Tobe looked completely scared and probably couldn't get into a conversation."

"I see… How about Ebina?"

"She's just being herself… Or rather, she's even more high-strung than usual because of the field trip, so she's gotten worse…"

Okay, judging from your tone, I've got an idea on what it was like.

Tobe's a disaster too. It's likely that Kawasaki wasn't too fond of the loud-mouthed Tobe and with Tobe being a wimp anyway, the delinquent Kawasaki was surely someone he wouldn't be good at dealing with. In addition to that, Ebina was holed in her fortress on the same level of the Death Star. It was impossible for Tobe to penetrate that fortress due to his inability to use the force.

In which case, it was very unlikely for there to be any developments in this Shinkansen. Looks like you were already doomed from the start for picking that position, eh.

For the person who was present just to be present, regardless of the situation, that role would never change. What needed to be adjusted wasn't the environment, but the person's human relationships.

"If only those two were alone together…"

"I doubt they'd get anywhere regardless."

"Right…"

Totsuka, who was listening in our conversation, hit his hand.

"Ah, Tobe's…"

"Huh? Do you know something, Sai?"

"Uh huh. I heard back at Chiba village over summer."

"Oh, I see. I mean, I heard about it myself just awhile back too. I just hope those two get along with each other. If Sai knows something, why not help out?"

"As long I can be of help. I hope it goes well."

Even with Totsuka's assurance as he smiled, the problem still proved to be quite difficult.

While I may not be that assertive person who wished happiness onto others, that doesn't necessarily mean my personality wished their misfortune either. It's something like the feeling of wishing those guys I'm not fond of to suffer more but I wouldn't go that far for Tobe.

But, when I glanced over to Yuigahama who was nodding and murmuring on the side while lost in thought, I couldn't help but feel that I needed to think of something too.

While crossing his arms and nodding his head, Totsuka let out a quiet "ah".

"Did you think of something?"

When I asked, Totsuka pointed outside the window.

"Hachiman, look, it's Mt. Fuji."

"Oh, guess we're almost there. Let's see."

"You can't see from there, right?"

Totsuka squirmed a little closer to the window and beckoned me over. It looked like he wanted me to get a little closer. I took him up on his offer and threw myself towards the window.

Totsuka's face was super close. As I got closer to the window, the messy looking Totsuka squirmed around in the tight space and softly turned his head. Despite that, his eyes were still looking at Mt. Fuji, as if he was trying to lead me on. In the narrow space, his sighs would quickly fog up the glass windows.

Hooh, so this is Mt. Fuji… Looks like it's almost time for my Mt. Fuji to come as well…

While I was getting cold feet over the fear of my Mt. Fuji erupting, something hugged my shoulders.

"I-I want to see too!"

Yuigahama pressed against my back and propped herself up with her arms using my shoulders as if riding me.

A sudden chill ran up my spine. Suddenly getting touched like this surprised me. The moderate application of perfume lingered in the air from her movements.

This body touching is definitely unfair…

However, I didn't have the composure to shake her off and get away from her, so I had no choice but to continue my stiff, standing posture.

"…"

Yuigahama stayed quiet for a moment while fascinated by the scenery. Her slight breathing had found its way towards my ears.

"Oooh~. Mt. Fuji is so pretty~. There we go."

Looking satisfied after getting a glance, Yuigahama finally removed herself from my back and sat back down in her seat.

"Thanks, Hikki."

"…Yeah."

Although I managed to reply in a calm manner, in reality, my heart was still beating like mad. Why in the world does she do these kinds of things, dang it. You listening? Those kinds of innocent actions tend to make guys misunderstand, effectively sending them to their graves, you know? If you understand, next time, please be mindful of "body touch", "sitting in a boy's seat during break or after school", "borrowing something from a boy even if you forgot something", and all other related things as you go on about.

And, for the sake of hiding the fact that my cheeks were completely flushed, I turned to Yuigahama to lecture her.

"You know…"

"I-I'm going to go over there now, okay!"

As Yuigahama said that, she stood up in a panic and ran off with quick footsteps.

She ran away… I couldn't help but be frustrated, vexed, annoyed at that, but in the same way it was unfortunate, I felt relieved all the more.

It looked like what happened earlier wasn't going to end so nicely so I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

When I did, I could hear a voice like that of a small bird coming between my arms.

"U-um… Hachiman, are you… almost done?"

Upon looking, I was still in a posture that looked like I was pushing over Totsuka. Totsuka had a muddy expression in his eyes as if the posture was a little bit too awkward.

"M-My bad!"

When I was about to fall back into my seat in a panic, my back slammed against the handrail.

"Urrgh…"

"Ha-Hachiman, are you okay!?"

"Yeah, no worries, no worries."

After I waved my hands and let Totsuka know of my safety, I touched my back. My back didn't hurt at all but the lingering warmth left me with a feeling of uneasiness.

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The trip was roughly two hours from Tokyo in the Shinkansen.

We got off at the Kyoto Station and we headed towards the bus station while doused in the autumn chill.

During the late autumn season, Kyoto was cold.

It was likely going to get even colder during this season.

Due to Kyoto's geographical terrain being similar to a basin, summer was hot while winter was cold. Conversely, this difference in climate could be said to bring out the occasional beauty of the four seasons in Kyoto.

In spring, the lightly dyed pink cherry blossoms would bloom in the mountain ridges. In summer, the fresh greenery was a sight to behold and watching the Kamogawa riverbeds was refreshing. In fall, the mountains would be dyed with the bright red of autumn. Finally, in winter, the snow that danced as it fell to the earth created a blanket of snow atop the mountain.

We were nearing the end of the late autumn and soon enough, it would be about that time of the season when snow would begin to trickle down from the sky.

It looked like today's schedule was to visit the Kiyomizu Temple.

Each class boarded a bus one by one.

The bus here had a similar seat layout of the Shinkansen as well. Hayama and Tobe sat together and in the same row sat Miura and Yuigahama. In the row in front of them was the Oooka and Yamato pair followed by the Kawasaki and Ebina pair. Of course, the most important point to keep in mind here was that Totsuka and I would be sitting together.

However, it didn't look like there would be any foreseeable developments between Tobe and Ebina in the bus either. Unlike the Shinkansen, you had less freedom to choose your own seats and on top of that, Kiyomizu Temple was quite close. It was within a walkable distance which meant that the bus ride would be faster in comparison.

We continued on the road expanding out from the town area, making turns, and approached the slope of a hill.

Our bus stopped in a large, open parking lot which was already filled with tourist buses. From here, we would climb the hill and head towards Kiyomizu Temple.

It was already well past the peak of the autumn season, yet there was still a staggering amount of tourists. That is to say, the Kiyomizu Temple area was usually crowded since it was one of Kyoto's most prominent tourist hot spots.

A group picture was taken at the back of the Deva gate. Unfortunately, this was a common route event so I couldn't skip it. The people who were friendly with each other solidified their unity in their groups while the lone wolves questioned their raison d'etre.

There were three main patterns to take from this.

The first one was the out-range style.

It's a style that had a low learning curve, so you could say it was geared towards beginners. However, simple it may be, the influence it could have was truly devastating. You can distance yourself from one to five students at most, but you were sure to take a tremendous amount of damage. That is, most of the damage was redirected to your parents who looked at your yearbook. And also to your future self who would reflect back on his past. It's recommended to quickly dispose of your yearbook and commemorative photos, but being half-hearted in preventive measures such as throwing them in your house garbage would more than likely result in your mother finding them. She would keep the photos in secret from her son and cry to herself in various meanings. Thus, it was a risky style.

The second was the guerilla style.

The plan was to mix in with your chatty classmates and act as if you were familiar with them all the while having a dead and artificial smile plastered on your face, evident by the laugh lines coming from the corners of your mouth. This method of camouflage was successful in avoiding pictures being taken where you were alone, but moments before the picture was taken, people would say "that guy only gets close when a picture gets taken doesn't he? (lol)" and your heart would be weighed down by the burden of the possibility of lingering effects after the battle.

The third was the in-fight style.

You boldly close up the distance between your classmates and go in at zero distance. As a result, you'd be in someone's shadow, partially covered by the people in front. Sure, you won't get a full shot of yourself, but since you get at least half of yourself taken in the picture, it'd become a decent memory and your mother wouldn't have to worry after seeing it. The picture wouldn't have been taken properly, but there was some beauty to it not having been taken perfectly as well. However, should the cameraman be feeling spunky at the time, he'd suggest

“aah, people in the front, could you move a bit since you’re blocking the people in the back?” and this was something to be wary of.

I went with the in-fight style this time and scanned the area for a good spot. Hmph, at times like this, a guy with a huge build like Yamato would prove to be useful here.

I pushed my way through my classmates, entered Yamato’s shadow, and took up a position between the people in front and a peculiar spot that was covered.

The sound of the camera shutter flickered many times. With the class picture having been taken properly, it was time for the class to move as one.

We climbed up the stone steps and when we passed under the gate, we were overwhelmed by the five storied pagoda. Since we were elevated above ground, we could see outlines of the cities of Kyoto, leaving us in awe.

There were already a crowd of tourists and students past the visitor’s entrance. We finally made it to the entrance, but it looked like it was going to take a little longer… Right now, there were still numerous classes waiting in line at the entrance.

I lined up quietly and spaced out until a voice called out to me.

“Hikki!”

Yuigahama, who wasn’t in line, came up to my side.

“What is it? Go line up or else you’ll get pushed out of the line. That’s just how life works.”

“You’re exaggerating… Anyway, this doesn’t look like it’ll be going anywhere any time soon. I actually came across something more interesting so let’s go there.”

“Maybe later.”

I’m not capable enough to be multi-tasking. I’m a human who wants to settle the problem in front of me before moving onto something else. You could also say that I preferred leaving the troublesome things for last.

As if Yuigahama didn’t like what I said, she glared at me with a puffed expression and mumbled.

“…Did you forget about our job?”

“I want to forget about the job during our trip at least…”

However, with my earnest wish not getting through to her, Yuigahama grabbed my blazer.

“I already called over Tobecchi and Hina so hurry, hurry!”

I was dragged along by the sleeve and the destination we arrived at was a small shrine located to the side from the main visitor's entrance.

Once you walked past the main gate, this shrine would immediately enter your field of vision but when compared with the main temple, it didn't leave too much of an impact which seemed to have been why it was ignored. I felt this wasn't all that rare around here. In fact, since there were so many Buddhist temples and shrines around here, if they didn't immediately strike out at you, you wouldn't be left with a lasting impression.

The one thing that may have differed from temple to temple would have been the enthusiastic old man who'd try to attract attention in various ways.

Traverse the inside of the shrine. Apparently, you were blessed with the grace of god if you were to enter the pitch black depths and come back.

As Yuigahama said so, Ebina and Tobe were already firing questions at the present old man for an explanation. By the way, Miura and Hayama were there as well.

"Why are they here too?"

I asked in a small voice so they couldn't hear and Yuigahama quietly moved her lips to my ears.

"If I just called those two, it'd be kinda weird."

"Hm, true…"

Indeed, if it was just those two, they'd start getting abnormally conscious of things. Tobe would become too much of a nervous wreck and Ebina would especially become more alert.

"C'mon, c'mon, let's go."

Yuigahama kept pressing on and after taking off our shoes, we paid 100 yen. You're really taking our money?

I took a peek at the bottom of the stairs and indeed, it was dark. If dungeons from RPGs existed, then this would have been how it felt.

"Mmkay, Yumiko and Hayato can go on first. The rest of us will follow behind you."

"We don't have too much time, so it'd be better if we keep the interval between turns short."

In response to Yuigahama's suggestion, Hayama gave an answer full of common sense. Seeing that we skipped the line entirely and came here instead, that was the right choice. Yeah, well, it was the right choice but the actual right choice would've involved "we'll follow you slowly right from behind", I think… For Hayama, that answer was rather half-hearted, but it seemed like no one minded.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Ebina was in agreement with Hayama’s opinion. Oh gosh, now it looks like I’m the only one thinking about Hayama, how embarrassing!

“Yeaa, this shouldn’t take too much time so we don’t needa worry too much. Right, Ebina. Hayato too.”

Ebina folded her arms and tilted her head, but Tobe laughed suddenly as he brushed up his long hair.

“Right. But, it’d be a good idea to be quick just in case.”

After Hayama answered with a bitter smile, Miura grabbed his arms.

“Well then, let’s hurry and go Hayato. It looks totally interesting anyway. We’ll be going first then.”

So proclaimed Miura as she accompanied Hayama down the stairs.

“Oh crap, if it’s this dark, I can’t help but get super pumped up for this.”

“Uhmm… Hah, pitch black… Hayato and Hikitani were supposed to go in there together…”

Leaving those unsettling words behind, Tobe and Ebina entered the interior as well. That’s just great… I’m glad there was some distance between Hayama and me…

“Okay Hikki, let’s get going.”

“Yeah.”

We descended down the stairs and when we turned around the corner, the darkness enveloped us. When we advanced several steps, the light completely dispersed from our field of vision.

We couldn’t let go of the prayer beaded handrail. If we were to let go, it was likely that we’d lose our sense of direction as well.

Regardless of whether we closed or opened our eyes, the deep darkness wasn’t going to change. This was the extent of the darkness of the abyss. As we inched forward making step by step progress, we’d make sure there was land to be walking on with our feet and if you were to look at this from the side, you’d get the impression that we were imitating penguins.

For the sense of sight that we lose, another organ would do its part and compensate for it by becoming even sharper.

Miura and the others’ voices could be heard a number of steps ahead.

Miura’s repeated ramblings sounded like incoherent Buddhist prayers which just made it even scarier.

“…Oh my gosh. So dark, it’s so dark, so dark, sooo dark, so dark.”

“This sure is amazing.”

As if he was responding to her or maybe it was just him being simple-minded, Hayama let out a response.

“Whooa, this is super dark, like totally bad, it’s happening, the darkness is going full MAX—“

Tobe was making a lot of noise as if he was trying to encourage himself. On top of that, someone was responding to him with “I know, right—“. For a second there, I thought that was the sound of a Bulbasaur, but that was probably Ebina.[23]

It wasn’t just my sense of hearing that was becoming sharper.

My sense of touch was also starting to become more sensitive.

We continued on while feeling around the surface of where we were going.

The air of tranquility. Since we were barefoot, the soles of our feet were assaulted by chills. The moments of chilliness that ran up our skins and the shivering wasn’t as simple as attributing it to the cold. It was genuine fear. The things we couldn’t see, the things we couldn’t understand, the things we couldn’t comprehend, and the things we couldn’t identify were all linked to fear and uneasiness.

Engulfed with feelings that we weren’t used to, we advanced forward while touching the large prayer beads wrapped around the handrail. Suddenly, my hand landed on something warm. I couldn’t help but be surprised and stopped in my tracks. And when I did so, something lightly bumped into me from behind.

“Waah! Ah, sorry. I can’t see at all here.”

The owner of this voice was Yuigahama. She couldn’t see at all, so she touched my back and arms to make sure I was there.

“Nah, my bad. I can’t really see at all in this darkness myself…”

Well, we are in complete darkness after all. Not much we could do. As we’re stuck in this avidya of darkness, we were assaulted by uneasiness and the act of grabbing hold of a person’s clothes and holding each other’s hands were countermeasures, so I won’t question it. No worries, recently, I held hands with Komachi, so I am to-totally, like totally not fretting over it or anything, like super easily endurable.

“Hikki, you’ve been really quiet so I thought you were lost or something.”

“I usually am lost most of the time.”

Thanks to that, my experience was incredibly high. On top of that, the speed at which I go home and my mental defense were both super high as well. After I

nonchalantly said that, I suddenly heard a restrained laugh, possibly something that couldn't be held in or perhaps a bitter one.

That became the signal to continue moving forward again. Despite having moved forward, the weight caught on my blazer stayed the same throughout.

We made numerous turns on the path and eventually, something flew into our pitch-black field of vision.

It was a deeply, dimmed white illumination. It looked like the rock was lit up.

When we walked up to the stone, I was finally able to see Yuigahama's face.

"We're supposed to make a wish as we spin this stone around, I think."

"Hmm."

There wasn't really anything I wanted to wish for. Stable income, safety of the household and perfect health seems about everything for me. Oh, that's plenty.

Still, wishing to the gods and Buddha for practical things doesn't seem quite right. Usually, those things can be acquired through hard work alone, so in that case, it'd be better to wish for things you couldn't get right?

Best of all, you could always try to give something to someone or perhaps try to steal something from someone.

"Did you decide what to wish for?"

Yuigahama's voice did away with all the useless thoughts in the darkness.

"Yeah."

I answered back, but I didn't really decide on anything... Let's see, I suppose I'll just pray for Komachi's success on the entrance exams.

"Okay, let's spin it around together.

I spun around the Chinese round table with the stone on top with Yuigahama. Yuigahama squinted her eyes shut, looking incredibly serious.

After we finished spinning the stone, she clapped her hands together twice. Stupid, that's what we do at shrines.

"Okay, let's go!"

Yuigahama was suddenly bursting with motivation for some reason, evident from her ecstatic expression, and while pushing me from behind, we entered the darkness once again.

However, after a little walking, we could see signs of the exit as if that stone was set to be the climax of the story.

As we climbed the stairs, the light that engulfed us was very nostalgic.

Along with the guys ahead of us, we looked at the sunlight and let out a sigh of relief.

Everyone climbed the stairs and after we made it outside, we strongly stretched our bodies.

“How was it? It feels like you were reborn again, right?”

The old man receptionist asked a question with a Kansai intonation. To Tobe, that is.

“Maan, totally felt like I went beyond the horizon, ya know—. So this is whatcha call being reborn, eh?”

Amazing, he doesn’t seem any different from before he entered the shrine.

I glanced at my watch but not much time had passed. It was about five minutes to say the least.

I’m not foolish enough to believe five minutes would have been enough time for me to be reborn. I wouldn’t have been reborn even if I took a trip to India or climbed the heights of Mt. Fuji. In the case that I was reborn, that didn’t mean that I could change all the things that have accumulated up until now. No matter what kind of changes my heart goes through, the surrounding’s evaluation of me, my past failings, and the things I couldn’t fix wouldn’t have changed.

There is a history to humans. Humans are shaped by the experience obtained from living as time continued to wind and wind. To be reborn meant being rid of that history; complete annihilation. However, that just wasn’t possible in reality. That’s why the only thing you could do was to continue living on, bearing the scars on your body and holding the weight of the sins on your back, without wishing for reincarnation.

Your wish to start life over won’t be heard by anyone.

Exactly how many times has Tobe failed up until now? If he had failed as much as I have and still managed to retain that optimism and straightforwardness, then it was worthy of respect.

But, that probably wasn’t the case.

Actually, I want that to be the case… I don’t want this carefree, conforming guy to have some sort of backbone or trauma. I don’t want him to be that guy that broke past all of that and can laugh heartedly, looking cool in the process…

“Ah, wait, this is bad! Everyone might have already gone ahead!”

Yuigahama said frantically when she glanced in the direction of the visitor’s entrance.

“Whaa, we gots plenty of time.”

So Tobe said but that may have been a bit off. From afar, you could see the students in black uniforms slowly beginning to move.

“C’mon, hurry!”

With Yuigahama prompting us to get going, we walked quickly towards the line to gather up.

× × ×

We managed to make it back to our class before they had gone inside the main temple. From there, we entered the main temple through the front entrance. Attraction objects like the God of Wealth[24] and the iron sandals with the pilgrim’s staff[25] were set up for display. The place was jam packed with people so finding a chance to feel the objects was difficult.

Following this was the Kiyomizu Temple stage which was farther in.

Even within the confines of Kiyomizu Temple, it indeed was the most popular spot. It wasn’t just the students but also the tourists who wanted to get commemorative photos of the place.

“Waah, amazing…”

Yuigahama placed her hands on the fence taken aback with the scenery. It was a spectacle that contained the autumn dyed outlines of the mountains and the innards of Kyoto. How did this exact scenery seen from above look thousands of years ago? While the city’s form may have differed, this exhilarating sensation you get from gazing from this high summit likely did not change.

Kyoto was a city where both the things that changed and didn’t change existed in harmony.

I can see why they chose this city as the field trip’s destination, even if it was just a little.

I gazed out at the scenery in a daze until the person who was next to me, Yuigahama, called out to me.

“Ah, I know. Hikki, let’s take a picture!”

She hurriedly took out her digital camera from her pocket. The small, pink digital camera was without a doubt very Yuigahama-esque.

“A picture? Roger, give it here.”

“Huh?”

With a puzzled expression, Yuigahama handed me the camera. I took a few steps back, positioned myself, and focused the finder on Yuigahama.

“Okay, peanuts.”

I then pressed the button. Shortly before the sound of flashing went off, Yuigahama frantically made a half-hearted reverse peace sign.

“Look at this, thanks to my awesome camera arm, I got a good picture.”

When I said that, I handed the camera back to Yuigahama who immediately went to checking the picture. Digital cameras sure were convenient since you could see the pictures as soon as you took the picture. But consider this: if you mess up a picture, you’ll have to take it again.

“Really? Ah, you took a cute shot, wait no! I mean, what the heck was with what you said earlier!?”

“You don’t know? The denizens of Chiba usually say it when they’re about to take a picture…”

“You don’t need to bother with that lie…”

It’s not exactly a lie, but I just thought it’d be cool if it was a new fad or something. Okay, everyone, when we take the picture, let’s all say peanuts!

“I didn’t mean that… I mean, it’s a rare occasion so let’s take the picture together.”

Being that upfront about it makes it hard to turn down. Then again, there really wasn’t a reason to reject the offer in the first place. I guess I could squirm myself out of it by saying my soul would be stolen by the camera, but, well, it’s just like she said, it’s a rare occasion. Since I didn’t bring my own camera, the only thing I could do was use another person’s camera to take pictures.

“Well, I don’t have a problem with taking a picture. I’ll go ask someone to take it for us.”

“We don’t need to do that since we can just do this.”

When she said that, Yuigahama stood next to me. She then faced the camera lens toward us and positioned it, ready to press the shutter button.

“I think we need to get a little closer or else we won’t fit in…”

Slowly, the distance between me and Yuigahama became nonexistent. Once she got closer, our arms linked.

“Here we go. Okay, cheese!”

Coming from the shutter button was an awfully light electronic noise.

My eyes wandered in the opposite direction from Yuigahama. Thanks to that, my eyes probably looked more rotten than usual. It was on the level of a spirit photograph.

Suddenly, Yuigahama let go of my arms.

After she took two steps back making small noises on the wooden floors of the stage, she turned her head in my direction.

“Thanks.”

“You don’t really have to thank me or anything.”

That’s right, taking a picture was nothing out of the ordinary.

When I looked around, there were numerous guys standing side by side posing in front of their cameras all over. This kind of scenery was probably relatively normal for high school kids nowadays. It was just one commemorative photo so there wasn’t a need to make a big deal out of it. Just about anyone would be up for taking pictures and pictures with both boys and girls weren’t all that rare either. In fact, those kinds of pictures were more along the lines of what was normal.

I was just overthinking it.

“Hey, Yumiko, Hina, let’s take a picture!”

Yuigahama pulled along Miura and Ebina so they could take a picture. It was a happy picture of three.

“Hayato and you guys too, let’s take one!”

When she called out to Hayama and company nearby, everyone shuffled together. Tobe, Oooka, and Yamato gathered as well as if her voice was the signal to do so.

“Oooh, yea, let’s take one.”

“Aah, you’re right… But, it’s kind of crowded.”

Hayama looked at his classmates and made a troubled laugh.

“Ah, then why don’t we break up into groups...”

Yuigahama made a suggestion to the group, but it looked like it didn’t reach any of their ears as Hayama walked in my direction, looking to hand me the camera.

“Could you take the picture?”

“…Sure.”

After I answered and took the camera, a line formed directly behind him.

“Do mine too.”

“Hikitani, can ya get one for me too~”

“Mine too.”

“Aah. Mine too!”

Please wait a moment. I only said I’d take a picture with Hayama’s camera, didn’t I…? Miura’s, Tobe’s, Ebina’s, Oooka’, hey, hey, there’s even more after that?

Entrusted with even more cameras after that, I accepted the rest of the people’s cameras at the end of the line with a sigh.

“Sorry. Hachiman, could you take a picture with mine too?”

“Oh yeah, leave it to me!”

This was the one and only unique photo to take. A picture full of my spirit. I’ll take the ultimate picture with my soul hammered into it! A reflection of my lingering, spiteful spirit may remain as well. Oh gosh, what a disappointing, sounding picture.

“…Ah, Hikki, sorry. Could you do mine too…”

Yuigahama came over to hand me her camera looking a little defeated.

I imagine she wanted to get a two shotter with just Tobe and Ebina so that was why she made the suggestion… This was expected when moving around with classmates. Not to mention if someone proposed to take a group picture with everyone, then that’d be difficult to overturn.

When I took her camera, I left her some words.

“Alrighty. Well, just do your best tomorrow.”

“Yeah…”

With a short response, Yuigahama went back to the group waiting at the fence of the stage. I prepared myself to take pictures.

Still, this was a ridiculous amount of cameras. The amount of cameras I was given was nearing the two digits.

Yaay, it’s like, I’m super popular or something.

Then again, after one picture, why don’t you guys just send each other the pictures through text or share it on Facebook, damn it? Times like this are when you guys should make use of the mystery that is the internet.

“Well, I’ll go ahead and take some pictures... Okay, peanuts.”

Okay, okay, peanuts, peanuts… I continued taking more pictures.

As I continued to take countless photos, at some point, I couldn’t help but notice Yuigahama’s colorful expressions. She was trying to enjoy every moment to the fullest and in every photo this was displayed whether it was through her expression

or gestures. I'm really glad these digital cameras had the function of focusing automatically for me. Otherwise, I'd get the feeling the pictures would be out of focus in various ways.

Miura posed as if she was all too familiar with having her picture taken, the way she made an expression every shot never changed regardless of what pose she took.

Hayama acted naturally, not making any particular flashy poses and gave off the impression of his usual self that was used to being seen by people. He looked quite good all the while.

In Tobe's case, he also acted natural and well, the plethora of magazine-like poses he made was without a doubt reeking of Tobe himself. Maybe Gaia was whispering him to shine even more.[26]

On the other hand, Ebina was smiling the whole time. It was a smile that I've recently gotten used to seeing. It's just that when she was the main star of a photo, I was feeling this exact but vague feeling of fear somewhere.

We followed the path extending from the main temple for observation.

The students continued on as a group to the Jishu Shrine.

The Jishu Shrine was located in the precincts of the Kiyomizu Temple. As a well-known god of good matches and fulfiller of love, it was a popular spot with the visitors. The first thing young people would do when visiting the Kiyomizu Temple would, without a doubt, visit this shrine.

In which case, for students on their field trip, then it was guaranteed. In the vicinity of the shrine were people shrieking and chatting away so it was incredibly noisy.

First, once they finished visiting the shrine, everyone would summon forth their spirit and buy a charm and a fortune slip.

I didn't have anything particular I wanted to buy, so I activated my "Special Technique – Follow behind them silently". I mean, I wouldn't mind buying one myself, but fundamentally, those fortune slips tended to be attractions where you'd show off your result to others, you know? That's why it wasn't a regular custom for me.

I quietly slipped in with the rest of the group and having observed my class, the number one popular attraction was without a doubt the "love fortune telling stone".

When I went to take a look, there were numerous girls rising up to the challenge. Their close friends acted like security guards to prevent people from obstructing the challenge and as soon as the path was secured, the challenger would yell "okay, here I goo—" and start.

A little farther from the love fortune telling stone was another stone and if you were able to safely make it to one stone to the other with your eyes closed, then your love would be granted. It was something along the lines of there being high stakes and "if you can do this, you'll get 1,000,000 yen!" [27]

Furthermore, in the same way you'd need someone's help with breaking a watermelon, receiving help with your love would likely follow the same pattern.

On closer inspection, a woman gowned in a white lab coat over her suit had made it to the other stone and was showered with applause. Our homeroom teacher sure is wonderful…

Following her were the high school girls waiting for their turn one by one and the boys would peek over to look at them. If a girl that they were interested in was up to bat, their thoughts would go "crap, that girl has someone she likes…? I wonder if it's me" while their heart beats at an abnormal pace. Wait, I think I'm guilty as charged with the same thoughts. Having expectations wasn't a bad thing. As long no one made a fuss about it, no one would suffer.

Along with the heart-throbbing guys who were hoping to get learn more of the situation, there were also guys who thought they'd come to check it out themselves from a distance. And from that, you could slightly feel the lovable nature of boys.

Or so that was supposed to be the case until I saw Tobe, who was lined up normally but seemed to be lacking a sense of modesty.

"Oh man, like for real, I'mma do this in one shot!"

With a declaration meant to appeal to the world around him, Oooka and Yamato, who were together in the temple grounds, cheered him on, clapping to enliven the atmosphere. Responding in kind with a guts pose, Tobe closed his eyes and slowly walked like a zombie towards his goal.

"Crap, I dunno where I'm going! Eeh? Real, am I supposed to go straight from here? Yeah?"

He sought advice from Oooka and Yamato but they responded back in jest.

"Go straight, go straight."

"Tobe, behind you!"

"Fuah!? Behind!?"

As he said that, he reflexively turned around.

"There's no point in turning around since your eyes are closed…"

Hayama mixed in a defeated sigh while he murmured. The temple grounds reverberated with laughter, an extremely pleasant atmosphere.

It’s great that everyone was having fun. Ebina had no reason to worry as they were indeed on good terms.

As I stared at the three idiots in a daze, Yuigahama looked like she had reached the same conclusion as she tapped Ebina’s shoulder.

“Hina, they look like they’re getting along really well, so isn’t that enough?”

“Yeah, I suppose so… But I won’t let my guard down until the end.”

Ebina responded while looking down. On my end, I couldn’t perceive what was hidden in those eyes lurking behind those lenses. The only thing I could comprehend was how different her tone was.

Yuigahama faced Ebina, whom she had rarely seen in such low spirits, with a puzzled stare.

“Eh? What does that mean…?”

As if to interrupt those words, Ebina raised up her head with an intense face, flinging around her curled fist and screamed out with a runny nose.

“C’mon! We better go as far as we can on this trip!”

Where are you going—?

Ah, in the end, it looked like Tobe received some help from Hayama just when he was about to fall over.

Once all the excitement over the love fortune-telling stone died down, our classmates were readying themselves to unseal their fortune slip.

“Yes, I got it!”

Miura made a very manly guts pose that oozed with her happiness. When Yuigahama peeked over at Miura’s palm, she raised her voice in surprise.

“Whoa! That’s amazing Yumiko!”

“You got great luck huh~”

Ebina also found her way to Miura and clapped.

“My gosh, what do you call this exactly? Even so, it’s just a fortune slip, you know? You totally don’t have to take it seriously or anything, you know?”

While Miura kept her composure as she said those things, the way she was happily folding the slip and putting it in her wallet as if it was something important made this young maiden in love very cute.

“But ya know, it’s that. While it may say so, great luck isn’t that good, ya know? It just means the rest of us all are gonna get the end of the shortstick.”

“Ah?”

Barging in was Tobe and what he got for it was a deadly glare from Miura. She really was scary, seriously.

Of course, Tobe shrank back himself and began saying things like “Oh yeah, great luck is pretty darn rare” out of fear for his own safety.

You get people like that sometimes, you know? The kind of person that tries to step on a person’s happiness and purposely tries to upset them. Back when I went to Nikko in my elementary school march, I said the same thing and was hated like every other person.

But, if you assume that pulling a great luck slip was the peak of your luck, then what he said wasn’t that far from the truth.

If your luck goes into a downward spiral from great luck, then the opposite should apply all the same.

“Aww, I got a bad luck slip…”

Ebina complained with a sad voice.

“Oh, ya know, it’s that. From here on, only good things should happen, ya know?”

After teasing Miura for her getting a great luck slip, as if he had noticed the earlier logic, he followed up on Ebina’s bad luck slip.

Well, well, even if we weren’t here, this guy’s doing pretty well for himself, isn’t he?

…Guess I gotta be a little tactful and follow him up.

“If you got a bad luck slip, then the higher, the better, right? Like, you know, so it can be seen as a bit more godly or something.”

That reeked of superstition especially considering the religious foothold we were in but, well, it was a legend I was knowledgeable about.

Accordingly, due to my sudden outburst, Tobe and Ebina looked around restlessly for the origin of the voice. No, no, that wasn’t a divine message from god, it’s me. It’s a-me Wario. Then again, I’m not Wario.

The two finally noticed me and I spoke again.

“It’s better if the slip was higher up. Why don’t you tie it?”

When I glanced in Tobe’s direction and said so, Tobe, looking like he understood, stretched out his hand towards Ebina.

“Oh, r-right. Why don’t ya hand it over?”

“T-Thanks. That’s a boy for you.”

Ebina handed Tobe her fortune slip. But, if “that’s a boy for you, (he’s so convenient)” was the actual meaning, then I’d have to mourn for the guy.

I made a sidelong glance at Tobe, who was tying the fortune slip while tiptoeing, and left the Jishu Shrine with a feeling of having settled a job.

The only thing left was following the visitor’s path.

As I walked aimlessly, there was a path connecting the inner sanctuary of the main temple and the view of the stage down to the Otowa waterfalls.

The flowing waterfall contributed to the origin of the Kiyomizu Temple name and was also called miracle water.

There were a staggering amount of people lined up before the waterfall that flowed down three lines.

There were numerous lines partitioned repeatedly, extending throughout the area. Hey, hey, it’s like they’re lining up for Disney Land here. Isn’t there a fastpass?

As I stood still in shock of the mayhem occurring in front of my eyes, I received a quick chop to my head.

“Don’t go ahead on your own!”

“Wha, we don’t have to move as a group today, so what’s the big deal…”

While I rubbed the spot that Yuigahama chopped me at, I looked at her and from behind came Miura and company.

“Oh, looks like the water’s flowing eh. There’s even three of them.”

Thanks for the simplistic impression, Tobe.

“It’s the Otowa waterfall.”

When Hayama responded in a careless manner, Yuigahama flipped through her guide book with one hand and began reading.

“Umm, your studies, your love, and the longevity of your life will be blessed apparently.”

…I see, that explains why Ms. Hiratsuka was lining up with a Daigoro bottle in her hand. You’re taking way too much home…

On second thought, was that really true? I don’t see that written at all anywhere on the Otowa waterfall visitor plate. All I can see was the proclamation “all three streams have the same water!” written on there, you know?

And then, without so much a complaint from anyone, everybody lined up. I made sure to line up myself, of course.

It was finally our turn after a wait of fifteen minutes in line. By the way, the teacher was given a warning for trying to scoop up too much of the love fulfilling water.

Everyone chatted in delight while sipping water from the ladle they picked up.

Yuigahama, who was ahead of me, was determined to aim for the middle waterfall. She extended out her long ladle and scooped some water from the waterfall. She carried the ladle up to her mouth and gently setting aside the hair caught by her ear, she sipped the water. Her white throat moved in moist gulps.

“Ah, this is amazing. It’s so good…”

After she finished drinking, she breathed a sigh of relief. This famous water was passed down from generations ago. The taste of the water was supported by its long history. Still, it was basically spring water and taking into account the season we’re in right now, the coolness of the water would definitely feel good as it slid down your scratchy throat.

When I grabbed the ladle, I reached for the sterilization shelf.

“Here, Hikki.”

Yuigahama stopped me midway and handed me the ladle that she used.

“No, that’s a bit… uh, something like that…”

Every now and then, she’d show a display of her meticulous planning as a girl and sometimes she’d naturally play dumb. As a result, my judgment would become cloudy.

But, it looked like she only really wanted to give me her ladle out of good will.

When Yuigahama understood the meaning of her action, her cheeks turned bright red.

“Ah…”

“Yeah…”

Well, that’s how it is.

After I grabbed the sterilized ladle, I scooped up water from the nearest waterfall and drank it in one gulp. It was cold and delicious.

“Y-You didn’t have to make a big deal out of it…”

…It’s a big deal to me. Besides, if I drank from yours, it's likely I wouldn't have tasted anything at all.

Chapter 6

Yukinoshita Yukino quietly goes to the evening town

When I came to, I was collapsed on the futon.

“An unfamiliar ceiling…”[28]

I sorted through my memory. Today was supposed to have been the field trip.

On the first day, we went to Kiyomizu-dera Temple followed by Nanzen-ji Temple. For some reason, we also had to walk to Ginkaku-ji Temple as well. The autumn weather was indeed a sight to behold and even the stroll along the Philosopher’s Walk canal was a good round-off exercise. The mood between Tobe and Ebina on their leisurely walk was looking pretty good too.

And so, with today’s plans a done deal, we then went to the inn, had our dinner and that was that.

That was that, so why was I sleeping here right now?

“Ah, Hachiman, are you awake?”

Totsuka, who was sitting next to me hugging his knees, stood up, kneeled down and peered into my face.

“Ah, yeah. No wait, what exactly is going on here…?”

Did I call forth King Crimson[29] and somehow get flown all the way to the my-married-life-with-Totsuka-begins-now END?

So I thought, but that clearly wasn’t the case since I could hear loud sounds and boisterous voices coming from somewhere in the room.

“Arrrgh. He seriously got me good.”

“Hayato’s too strong!”

When I peeked in the direction of the voices, they belonged to the guys in my class whom were having fun laughing and making exchanges followed by slapping and popping noises.

Okay, I have a good idea of what’s going on here.

Apparently, my plans to sleep the second I got home after having the rhythm of my everyday life disturbed didn’t work out. The entire afternoon was spent moving around and once we got to some random inn and had a huge feast, the moment I arrived at my room, I passed out.

“Bath time’s already over, but the teacher said you could use the indoor bath.”

“W-What!?”

In other words, I missed the chance to take a bath with my precious Totsuka!?

Because I was dealt such a heavy shock, I jumped up to my feet from my futon. It looked like I may needed to slay God…

While I gritted my teeth in frustration, Totsuka pointed firmly in the direction of the entrance of the room.

W-What’s that mean? Could he possibly be telling me “You’re such a pervert, Hachiman. For a pervert like you, you can just go take a dip in the garden’s pond all by yourself” perhaps? I’m not exactly a pervert or prince though…[30]

I couldn’t help but be worried at the prospect, but Totsuka continued with a soft tone.

“There’s a unit bath over there.”

“I see, thanks.”

I’d very much prefer to become a unit with Totsuka and take the bath together, but I’ll set that aside to be enjoyed for tomorrow. I mean, this field trip was going to last three days and four nights. There were two chances left for the bath too. On top of that, we were going to the inn in Arashiyama which meant dipping in the hot spring. An open-air bath. That’s going to be the best.

I showered in excitement.

Once I got out of the bath, my eyes met with Tobe’s, who was lying on the floor. I suppose he lost his motivation after losing hard. But, he bounced back onto his feet and called out to me.

“Oh, Hikitani. You awake, eh? Wanna Mahjong it up? It’s a real turn off how strong those guys are.”

Hey, are you asking me because it’d be an easy win for you since I look like I’d be weak? Huh?

But, you know, I suppose him coming to invite you and talk to you were one of Tobe’s finer points. However, I wasn’t exactly the type of guy to go with the flow and cooperate with others.

“Sorry. Don’t have a clue how point tallying works.”

Tobe didn’t bother pushing the issue any further after I softly rejected his offer. He went on saying “are you serious” and went back to the Mahjong circle.

I really didn’t know how to tally the points. The CPU in games tended to automatically calculate it for you, that’s why.

Totsuka joined the Mahjong group as well and it looked like he was being taught the rules, but as soon as he noticed me, he waved his hands.

Now then, what to do now? I was thinking maybe I should sleep, only to be interrupted by the doors being flung open boldly.

“Hachimaaan, let us go forth with some Uno instead of that other trivial stuff!”

Zaimokuza came to invite me like how Nakajima would go to invite Isono.[31]

“…Don’t you have something to do with your class?”

Because he had entered the room as if it was a given, I figured I’d ask. As Zaimokuza opened his mouth, he rushed at me to embrace me. I peeled him off and sat him down.

“Listen to me Hachiemon. Those guys are terrible. ‘Sorry Zaimokuza. This game’s for only four players’ was what they told me and I had to wait my turn like a sore loser.”

Isn’t waiting for your turn normal? Besides, you’re mixing in quite fine with them and I think that’s pretty good for you. Just get along with them, man.

“Oh, what game are you playing?”

Totsuka came in with a question and Zaimokuza puffed out his chest.

“Npaka, npaka, the Dokapon Kingdom of Dreams!”

Don’t try to copy Crayon Kingdom of Dreams.

“…Still, playing a game that destroys friendships on a field trip?”

Whether it was Dokapon or Momotetsu, they were games that brought out a person’s inner demon. It was fine if it was just a wicked plan conjured up by a malicious person. It’d become a useful tool once the fight started after all.

The problem was the horrible atmosphere when you’re playing the game with a group of angry people. Friendships were bound to be strained as a result. If we consider other problems, then that one guy who lost his motivation and tells everybody “you can just move mine” while reading manga would be another one.

I do recall having that happening once in elementary.

“So that’s how it is, let’s play some UNO.”

“Ah, that sounds good. They were teaching me the rules of Mahjong but I don’t get it all.”

Zaimokuza pulled out UNO cards from his breast pocket and shuffled the cards like a magician.

He began distributing the cards.

“I shall make the first move.”

As soon as he said that, he abruptly presented a number of R cards.

“Riba, riba, riba, riba, riba!”

Riba, riba, riba, riba is really annoying, are you singing Somebody Tonight or something?

The turn order switched in the other direction thanks to Zaimokuza’s reverse card, making it my turn after his followed by Totsuka. From there, the game proceeded just like every other UNO game: I discarded a card, a skip one that is, only to get crapped on by a Draw Two card in which I backlashed with a Draw Four card on the card color I thought they wouldn’t have.

Once I realized the game was at its climax, I only had two cards left. Zaimokuza and Totsuka had a total of five cards so I was in a superior position.

I then gave a warm reception to my turn. Just as I was about to discard one of my cards, Zaimokuza made a small groan and called out to me.

“In any case, Hachiman, where are you planning to go tomorrow?”

“Huh? Don’t be bringing up irrelevant things in the middle of a match.”

Tch, this guy just had to ask about the most annoying thing. I seethed with an intent to kill and just as I was about to answer him, he suddenly flicked his head in the direction of Totsuka.

“Then that’s fine. Where are you going Sir Totsuka?”

“Um, I think we were going to go to Eigamura and Ryouan-ji Temple. After that—“

Totsuka put his cards on his knee and assumed a posture looking up trying to remember whatever place it was. Because he looked so cute, I threw myself into the conversation.

“After that was Ninna-ji Temple and Kinkaku-ji Temple.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

As he said that, Totsuka promptly discarded a card.

At that instant, Zaimokuza jumped to his feet and pointed at me in fervor.

“Okay, Hachiman, you didn’t say UNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Kh, huh…”

By the time the realization hit me, I was too late. Totsuka had already discarded his card.

“Yaaaay!!”

“Yaaaaay!”

Zaimokuza yelled out with a triumph of victory and when he raised his hands, Totsuka did so as well and they high-fived.

Huh, what the heck, they were both in on it together? No wait, I want to high five Totsuka too…

That’s dirty, Zaimokuza, real dirty.

He snatched the timing right out of my hands when he called out to me. That was really unfair…

But, I’m totally satisfied since the frolicking Totsuka was so adorable.

“Hachiman, penalty game, penalty game!”

“Indeed, Hachiman! A penalty game it is! Hold your ground as we think of what it shall be!”

The two were in really high spirits, a side effect from the enlivened atmosphere on the night of the field trip.

The others were acting the same way and the Mahjong group in the other direction were incredibly animated on the same idea of a penalty game.

“Alright, the big loser is to…”

Yamato, who proclaimed, peeked over at Oooka.

“Go to the girls’ room and get some candy!”

“Oh, are you seriooous, you guys gotta quiiiiiiiit that!”

It came… Proposing to go to the girls’ room was more or less a normal thing for that group over there. But, Hayama tried to contain the excitement in response to the proposal.

“Ah, about that, Atsugi is waiting at the top of the stairs.”

“No joke…”

Yamato sealed his mouth shut.

The physical ed teacher, Atsugi, exuded an intimidating aura and thanks to his mysterious Hiroshima dialect, you couldn’t help but be on the receiving end of his hard-faced expressions. On top of his position as the physical ed teacher, he often intermingled with the sports clubs, so they were likely not very good at dealing with him. I’m no better, of course.

“Alright then, girl confessions! Let’s start!”

Oooka quickly pitched out a different proposal and promptly got into it. Tobe and Yamato complained with boos followed by others. Hayama smiled bitterly as he dealt out a tile.

They repeatedly discarded the tsumos and when it was finally Tobe's turn, he raised his voice.

"Ah, tsumo."

When he dropped his tile, everyone sighed.

"Tch, why'd you have to say it, ya good for nothing. Go confess."

"We'll kill ya. Getton outta here and confess, ya loser."

Oooka and Yamato cursed him.

"What's with that treatment, yo!?"

Tobe fought back while Hayama laughed as he knocked down his tiles.

"Well, you know Tobe, you're quite the loser. Then, why don't you go buy us some juice as your punishment game?"

"Even though I didn't lose!? I was gonna go buy something anyway since I was thirsty though!"

So you're going after all… What an honest fellow… That was a pretty forgiving punishment from Hayama, but he sure did a number with those words there…

When Totsuka saw Tobe exit the room, he muttered.

"Ah, we're kinda thirsty too huh?"

"Indeed. Well then, Hachiman, your penalty game will be exactly that. Buy us some drinks."

"Alrighty. What do you want? Ramen for Zaimokuza, then?"

"Hmph, that's a fascinating proposal…"

"Get your head out of the gutter…"

It looked like Zaimokuza was going to take a while to give an answer so I looked at Totsuka. As soon as I did, Totsuka smiled, nipa~.

"I'll leave it to you Hachiman."

"Alrighty."

I got up on my feet and left the room.

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The sound of footsteps echoed as I descended down the stairs.

The rooms on the floor above were designated for the girls. According to the rumors, Atsugi was keeping watching at the top of the stairs to prevent any of the boys from going any further, but it wasn't worth my time to go the extra mile to confirm them.

The soda machines were in the lobby located on the first floor.

We were allowed to wander around the lobby if it was just about bedtime. But, since everyone was busy mingling with their friends, there wasn't anyone who would bother to come down here. That is to say, the only people who would be down here would be people like me and Tobe who were forced to go buy things because of a penalty game.

At the corner of the lobby in front of the vending machine was Tobe.

He grabbed one can and bought numerous more afterwards. Tobe noticed me as soon as I got closer.

"Oh, Hikitani, good work~."

"Yeah."

His greeting was always "good work~" whether it was morning or night. It was akin to Yuigahama's "yahallo". After we exchanged our greetings, I switched places with Tobe and stood before the vending machine.

But, I could feel this bizarre stare prickling my back, so I turned around.

Oddly enough, Tobe was still standing there.

"What is it?"

When I dubiously asked Tobe a question, who was still here despite having completed his duties, he chuckled.

"Naaah, Hikitani, you're workin' pretty hard and all for my sake. I sorta wanted to thank ya or something? Like, nice assist or so."

For your information, the assist doesn't get recorded if you don't make the goal.

"I didn't really do much. The one who's actually doing the most work is Yuigahama. Go thank her."

"Aah, I do plan on doin' that too. But I figured I'd thank ya too. Thanks to ya two, I'm just about ready to confess, ya know? But I'm countin' on ya tomorrow too!"

After he said that, he left quickly.

Hm, I suppose he’s kind of a nice guy. Whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, he was the type to go with the flow. In other words, he was a slave to the atmosphere…

was progressing with Ebina. It was a no brainer to see why he couldn't make the appropriate advances because he'd respond to every changing moment in the atmosphere.

It's going to be a bumpy ride…

A confession, huh? It won't be easy, but I hope it works out for him.

Because I was suddenly hit with exhaustion, I decided to get some sweet MAX coffee to drive it away.

I stared at the selection of choices in the vending machine from the top, one by one.

…?

Once more, I stared at the choices, but this time from the bottom.

Again, as if I was looking for the GaGaGa books at a bookstore, I carefully examined each selection. If I decided to cut corners, I get the feeling I'd completely skip over the blue spine of that book.

But, no matter how much I looked, I couldn't find the can of sugar (MAX).

Eh… what's going on here?

I kept searching and searching, but it's just Pachimon MAX coffee that's sold here!

This is Kyoto… As expected of the royal castle spanning thousands of years…

I compromised and went with a café au laut instead. Well, the can was just as long so same thing, I suppose.

I opened the can and sank onto the sofa in the corner of the lobby.

Although I was entrusted with buying drinks as punishment for losing, I didn't have it in me to return to the room that was turned into a Mahjong parlor.

As I took a small sip of the slightly sweet coffee, a recognizable figure appeared from the corner of the lobby.

The one who appeared while walking briskly in a grand-like manner was Yukinoshita Yukino.

She was sporting a rough appearance with her hair tied up as if she had just gotten out of the bath, a rare sight.

Yukinoshita headed in the direction of the souvenir corner of the hotel in her current appearance.

When she got there, she was intently staring at one of the shelves… Well, for Yukinoshita to be examining whatever item so seriously meant she was going to get it.

Yukinoshita put her hand to her lips, thought a little, and having finally decided, she stretched out her hand towards the merchandise. But, it was that exact moment. That exact moment when Yukinoshita took note of her surroundings.

Of course, her eyes met with mine since I was staring at her the entire time.

Yukinoshita pulled back her stretched out hand and returned to the path she came from with a feigned expression.

…The same old pattern. I communicated a "good night" to Yukinoshita and sipped the rest of my café au lait.

But, Yukinoshita briskly walked in my direction.

She stood in front of me with her arms crossed and looked down towards me in my sitting position.

"Quite the coincidence to meet you this late at night."

"That's something that should've been said earlier…"

Rather, I was surprised that she took the trouble to come tell me that. Still, what's with this girl and that haughty attitude of hers…?

"What's wrong? Did you run away since it was too difficult to stay in the room?"

"The young folks entrusted me with a mission, that's all. You?"

Yukinoshita sighed with a fed up expression.

"…My classmates pulled me into their discussions. Why do they like talking about those things so much?"

W-What kind of conversation could that be… It wasn't of any interest to me, but it felt like she'd get angry at me if I asked about it so I kept it to myself. Instead, times like this were where I should say something to ensure my well-being.

"Well, you should consider getting into it yourself if you're going to get asked about it. Not a bad thing, right?"

"You talk like it has nothing to do with you. In the first place, during the Culture Festival, you…"

The stare that looked down on me turned into a sharp glare that pierced at me halfway through.

“M-Me…? No, wait. I’m not at fault here.”

I hadn’t a clue what she was referring to, but for now, I made sure to be insistent about it. When I did, Yukinoshita pressed against her temples and closed her eyes. She opened her mouth in resignation.

“…It’s nothing. So, what are you doing here?”

“A little break from fun. How about you? Weren’t you going to buy a souvenir?”

“Not at all. Something just caught my eye, that’s all.”

Yukinoshita averted her gaze with a slight sigh.

Is that so? I thought for sure she was going to buy it since she was looking at it so seriously, but I suppose she was just looking at the Kyoto special edition of Pan-san[32].

“Aren’t you buying any souvenirs?”

“It’ll just get in the way if I buy them now. I’ll buy them on the way home.”

“I see. Have you already decided what to buy?”

“Pretty much. Well, it’s basically just the stuff Komachi wanted me to get. Ah, any places with a god of studies around here?”

I figured I’d ask anyway. Don’t let me down, Miss Yukipedia. Yukinoshita blinked and turned her head.

“Praying for Komachi’s success?”

“Yep.”

When I answered, Yukinoshita smiled. As the older brother, I’m very happy that my little sister was loved by so many people.

“…Let’s see.”

Yukinoshita sat down next to me while in thought. Well, making conversation while standing was tiring after all. I followed up by making some distance between her and me.

“Kitano Tenman-gu shrine is quite famous.”

“Tenman-gu huh, I’ll keep that in mind.”

I’ll head over there too once we get to move around as we want on the third day. There’s also the charm that I’ll have to buy, but making a prayer was definitely going to cost some money. Carrying a hamaya on the way home might be a pain too... then again, would the person still be blessed even if they didn’t write on the wooden plaque?

“…It’s fine that you’re concerned about Komachi, but how’s the request going?”

Agh, crap, I was swimming around in my thoughts there.

“It’s along the lines of not going well, but not going bad either.”

When I answered, Yukinoshita averted her eyes, looking apologetic.

“I’m sorry, I’m not of much help since I’m in another class.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m in the same class and I haven’t done squat.”

“I think you should at least be a little concerned there…”

As we continued the conversation, Ms. Hiratsuka passed by. She was wearing a coat over her suit and for some reason, she was wearing sunglasses even though it was dark out.

As soon as she noticed us, she looked obviously bewildered.

“W-Why are you guys here?”

“Well, I just came here to buy some drinks. What are you doing here at this hour, teach?”

“M-Mmm… D-Don’t tell anyone, okay? Keep it a secret, okay?”

Ms. Hiratsuka was insistent with her reminders and since she looked more feminine than usual, my heart skipped a few beats. I was a little embarrassed and the words “Shizukacute” floated around in my head, but her next words completely destroyed the thought.

“U-Um… I-I was just going to… Go get some ramen…”

She’s no good. I’d like you to return my words of adoration back.

Both Yukinoshita and I looked at her hopelessly, but Ms. Hiratsuka crossed her arms and corrected her posture as if something came to mind.

“Hm. Well, if it’s you two, then it should be fine.”

“Come again?”

After a moment of trying to decipher the meaning of her words, Yukinoshita turned her head.

Ms. Hiratsuka flashed a smile at Yukinoshita and when she looked at me, she gave me a mischievous grin.

“I’m sure Yukinoshita will keep to herself, but unfortunately, I can’t say the same for Hikigaya.”

“That’s cruel…”

I’m definitely going to tell on you. I don’t have anyone to tell though.

Having looked at my rebellious attitude, Ms. Hiratsuka cleared her throat and added.

“As such, I’ll treat you to a bowl in return for your silence. So, how about some ramen?”

…Ramen, you say? So basically, go with you, huh?

Kyoto ramen, this’ll be my first time. My stomach was already ready to digest, possibly a side effect from youth. Rather, just hearing the words ramen made my stomach feel emptier.

“Well, if you say so.”

When I answered, Ms. Hiratsuka nodded in delight.

Aaah, can’t wait for some Kyoto ramen. As these thoughts ran rampant in my head, Yukinoshita, who was sitting next to me, quietly stood up.

“Well then, I’ll be going back.”

She bowed beautifully to Ms. Hiratsuka and turned in the other direction. Ms. Hiratsuka called out to Yukinoshita from behind.

“Yukinoshita, you come along as well.”

“No, that’s…”

Yukinoshita turned halfway around and dropped her eyes with a troubled look. Ms. Hiratsuka smiled with a grin when she saw that.

“Oh, you can think of it as extracurricular activities. It’s not that late after all.”

“But, I’m still dressed as I am right now.”

She squeezed the loose cuffs on the sleeves of each hand and spread out her dress as if she was making a bow. Ms. Hiratsuka took off her coat and tossed it to the reluctant Yukinoshita.

“You can wear that.”

Oh dear, what’s with her? So cool. I’m gonna fall for her at this rate. Indeed, the times were all about the “Shizukacool” and not “Shizukacute”.

“There’s no room for refusal, huh…”

“Looks like it.”

Yukinoshita sighed lightly and wore the coat she was handed in resignation.

“Now then, let’s get going.”

Taking us along for the trip, Ms. Hiratsuka walked along on her heels and as the sounds of the heels hitting the floor echoed, she gallantly headed for the night Kyoto.

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The night breeze was uncomfortably cold as we made our way from the hotel. I should note that I'm out here in my indoor clothes too…

"Kyoto sure is cold."

Ms. Hiratsuka looked at my outfit and gave me a mocking smile.

Once we made it onto the street, Ms. Hiratsuka slightly raised her hand. Immediately, a small sized taxi that was cruising by stopped abruptly.

"Go ahead, Yukinoshita."

Yukinoshita was guided by the acting chaperone, Ms. Hiratsuka. After she adjusted her coat, she nodded to Ms. Hiratsuka and boarded the car.

Next, Ms. Hiratsuka paved the way for me as well.

“You too, Hikigaya.”

“That’s fine, teach, you may go in first.”

However, I objected to the notion. When I did, Ms. Hiratsuka had a surprised and impressed reaction and responded accordingly.

“Oh, you’re the ladies-first type? How you’ve grown. But, you don’t need to worry about me.”

“Eh… N-No matter how many years you tack on, you’re still a lady you know! Please have more confidence in yourself!”

With a wide grin plastered on her face, Ms. Hiratsuka grabbed my forehead.

“It’s because the middle seat in the back has the highest rate of death, you see…”

“Ouch, ouch, ouch.”

With the iron claw grasping my head, I was thrown inside the taxi. She seemed to have increased the variations of her attacks, simple body blows notwithstanding. This was clearly a mutual display of growth for the both of us.

“…Silly.”

“Shaddup. It’s my form of kindness.”

“I think your idea of kindness is completely mistaken…”

Ms. Hiratsuka sat next to me. I was under the impression that three people in the back seats of this tiny taxi would be tight, but since Yukinoshita and Ms. Hiratsuka had slender figures, there was actually a lot more room than I thought. Phew… I wasn’t sure what I’d do if we were jammed together in this small space.

“Take us to Ichijouji.”

Ms. Hiratsuka instructed the driver and the taxi went on its way.

Ichijouji; it was a place that may have been familiar to those who were fond of Miyamoto Musashi. On the very grounds of Ichijouji laid the sagarimatsu pine, famous for bearing witness to the life and death duels between Musashi and the Yoshioka School. Supposedly, this wasn’t actually based on actual history and instead stemmed from a literary piece further down the line.

With that being said, Ichijouji was apparently one of the prominent, competitive ramen areas, evident from the many famous stores lined side by side.

That made up the bulk of the conversation until we arrived at our destination. The taxi sure was fast. Way faster than the salamander. [33]

And once we got off the taxi, a shocking scene laid before my eyes.

“T-This is Tenka Ippin…”

Indeed, Tenka Ippin, the best under the heavens. And I don't mean beauty here. I've heard nothing but rumors of this place. In the soup they use was a liquid consistency that enwraps around the noodles, submerging the chopsticks that you stick in.

As I trembled in my own passion, Yukinoshita spoke up behind me.

"Is this store famous?"

"Yeah, it's quite a hit throughout the nation actually."

"Did we really have to go out of our way to come here…?"

Now that she mentioned it, that was true. However, there was another reason why I was so moved.

"You see… for some reason, there isn't a store in Chiba. In the entire Kanto region, Chiba's the only one without it…"

According to my long and expansive years of history (seventeen years' worth), Chiba was sung as the promised place (by me), but regardless, I could not consider Chiba perfect. The one reason for this imperfection was this very store, Tenka Ippin.

"Well, at some point, there was one in Chiba."

Finishing up her before-dinner smoke energetically, Ms. Hiratsuka stomped the floor.

"T-There it is! Chiba's one and only walking ramenpedia! No, I mean one and single!"

"You're correcting your sentences the wrong way, Hikigaya."

"Ouch ouch ouch."

Her voice sounded cheerful, but my skull was saying otherwise.

"There are stores all over Japan, but it's definitely more awe-inspiring to be here in front of the main store. You can't say anything about the taste if it was a small chain shop either. I always wanted to try eating here once."

After finally releasing my head, Ms. Hiratsuka gazed at the outline of the store with eyes full of emotion.

"Now then, let's enter."

Luckily, there were plenty of seats in the store.

We sat at the counter in the order of Ms. Shiratsuka, Yukinoshita, and then me.

"Kotteri."

Ms.Hiratsuka ordered without even a glance at the menu. Well, I wanted to try the kotteri from TenPin myself, what with the rumors and all.

“Same for me here.”

“…”

I didn’t hear an order from Yukinoshita so I looked over at her. When I did, I couldn’t help but be at a loss for words when I saw how Yukinoshita fidgeted as she looked around her.

She pulled at my sleeve.

“…Hey, is that soup?”

It was as if her expression was full of fear. No, that actually might’ve been correct. But, you know, how exactly are you going to eat if you’re this scared? And that naritake, it wasn’t so much soup as it was just fat. It’s super good though.

Ms. Hiratsuka chuckled at Yukinoshita’s amusing behavior and opened up a menu for her.

“There’s assari soup too. I think it might be more to your liking.”

“Ah, no thank you. I feel full from just looking at it…”

Yukinoshita shook her head in surprise with a frightened expression that resembled a cat.

“Oh? In that case, why don’t we get a small plate and you can try some of it.”

Even with Ms. Hiratsuka’s suggestion, Yukinoshita still looked frightened, but she reluctantly nodded in agreement.

Once we made our orders, it took some time before the ramen was brought to us.

I picked up the chopsticks and clapped my hands.

“Thank you for the food.”

Hooo boy! The thick feeling that’s left on these chopsticks! I can’t get enough of it!

The droopiness of the soup that fully coated the noodles. The thick and deep texture of the soup was something you could only taste at places like Tora no Ana in Chiba.

What the heck, this is gooood!

“Here, Yukinoshita.”

Ms. Hiratsuka softly placed a small dish in front of Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita looked a little lost, but having set her resolve, she grabbed chopsticks and a spoon. She gently adjusted her hair behind her ears and slowly lifted the spoon to her

mouth. The way she had drunk and swallowed the dense soup was so excessively captivating that I had to avert my eyes.

After wiping the soup around her mouth, she made a really serious expression.

"…What a violent taste."

Yay, so accurate.

As we welcomed the delicious taste of ramen, as late as it was, I couldn't help but think whether doing this was a good thing or not. The thought left my lips.

"Still, should a teacher really be doing this?"

So I said, but Ms. Hiratsuka remained calm.

"Of course not. That's why I'm paying for your silence."

"Isn't that even less becoming of a teacher…?"

Yukinoshita responded with a shocked tone, but Ms. Hiratsuka continued eating without looking the least bit agitated.

"Teachers are human as are adults. We commit mistakes just as any other person would whether we're aware of it or not."

"Won't you be reprimanded if you get caught?"

I'll probably get dragged into that too though.

"That won't happen. At the very least, they'll just call me in as a formal measure, give me a few words of disagreement, and keep it at that."

"Can you really call that a scolding…?"

I was in agreement with Yukinoshita. Ms. Hiratsuka drank up the remaining soup in her bowl and neatly wiped her mouth with a napkin. She then turned our way.

"It's different. Being told to not cause any trouble and being asked to clean up any problems are completely different.

"I don't get it."

"…I wonder. Maybe it's because we don't have any experience being scolded?"

Yukinoshita placed her lightly gripped hands on her chin and was lost in thought digging through her memories. Ms. Hiratsuka nodded her head after looking at Yukinoshita.

"I see, then let me scold you properly. I wasn't really planning on doing any scolding but I guess I was a little too naïve."

"No, that's quite all right."

I waved my hands and declined the offer. If she does any more and I suffer even more body injuries, I'll become used goods and I'll have to have you take responsibility and take me for a husband. But wait, that's actually my goal all along…

While I was restless about various things, Yukinoshita looked perfectly calm.

"I don't mind since I've never been scolded before."

"Yukinoshita, being scolded isn't necessarily a bad thing. It just means that someone's looking out for you."

Yukinoshita's shoulders dropped slightly from Ms. Shiratsuka's words. She lowered her head and looked downwards. I hadn't the slightest idea if something had caught her eyes or not.

Ms. Hiratsuka gently patted Yukinoshita's shoulder.

"I'm looking over you, so don't worry and make all the blunders you want."

We got off the taxi that drove us back and Ms. Hiratsuka began walking in the opposite direction of the hotel.

"I'm going to go buy some sake for a good drinking session. See you. Be careful on your way back."

Is that really okay?

Ms. Hiratsuka waved her hands and we responded in the same fashion. Yukinoshita and I began walking towards the inn. We were both silent but I felt this was completely natural for the both of us.

"……"

"……"

Yukinoshita was a few steps ahead of me.

But, suddenly she stopped. She started looking around restlessly.

…I guess this was what you'd call common sense built from experience, but I somewhat understood why Yukinoshita was having a lot of trouble.

"To your right."

"…I-I see."

She adjusted the coat that she hadn't given back to Ms. Hiratsuka and covered her face to avoid the night breeze.

I made a bitter smile, took a small breath, and began walking ahead of Yukinoshita. I'll at least show her the way back.

The sound of her footsteps slowing down indicated that she had an idea of what I wanted to do.

But the sound of those footsteps gradually grew farther.

Thinking it was weird, I turned around only to see that the distance between me and Yukinoshita had widened considerably.

“If you’re that far apart from me, you’ll get lost again…”

“No… um…”

I asked her but I didn’t get a clear response. She lifted up her coat and buried her face in the collar which drowned out her voice.

I had no idea what she was trying to say, but it’d be a pain if we separated here and she ended up getting lost. With that in mind, I waited for her to come my way.

As we stood in our opposing positions, Yukinoshita and I stared at each other. Still, what the heck were we doing here…?

As we stood there for a moment, Yukinoshita let out a resigned sigh.

“I wouldn’t have minded if you went ahead…”

She murmured and reluctantly walked up to my side. This was similar to winning over a stray cat I suppose.

“Nah, I don’t think it really matters if I go on ahead or not. It’s right over there anyway.”

“…Maybe not for you, but it does for me.”

I couldn’t help but respond with an inarticulate answer. Well, it’s considered good manners to act like you didn’t hear anything if the other party looked like they were having trouble saying something.

“What does?”

“Um… this late at night… being seen together is a bit…”

It wasn’t all that cold yet Yukinoshita was retreating back into her coat while hiding her face.

“…I-I see.”

Now that she mentioned it, I calmly began thinking about our current situation. Sure, all we did was meet with each other almost near night time.

It was definitely something not to be so conscious of and not to be worried about and even weird either. Totally nothing at all.

I should note that this is the first time I’ve seen Yukinoshita like this.

She would keep her eyes peeled to my feet just so she wouldn't get lost all the while being cautious of her surroundings.

The way she'd embarrassingly hide her eyes and the way she'd slightly extend her hands out to me to stop me from going too far ahead only to pull them back were things I'd never seen her do before.

Those awkward gestures were infectious and I unconsciously started to move my right hand and foot in unison. Because of that, the inn felt far.

Both Yukinoshita and I were by no means walking alongside each other but as we walked, it felt like we weren't at all close yet we weren't at all far away from each other either.

Once we finally made it up to the lobby of the hotel, I suddenly felt tired.

There were definitely going to be students ahead. If Yukinoshita's being conscious of her surroundings, then it'd be best to separate here.

I stopped in my tracks to let Yukinoshita go on ahead and I slightly raised my hand.

"See you."

"…You as well, good night… Um, thank you for walking me back."

After she answered, she started on ahead. We're already indoors yet she was still wearing the coat. Since she was walking so fast, the cuffs of the coat kept fluttering around.

I thought about useless things like whether she was planning to return the coat back or not while making my way back to my room.

When I entered, the room was still being used as a mahjong parlor.

"Ah, Hachiman, welcome back."

Totsuka and Zaimokuza were playing old maid.

"Where did you go? You took your time."

"Really?"

Well, it was about two hours I'd say since I left.

"So, where's my nourishment and ramen?"

"Ah."

Oh right, I was still in the middle of my punishment game.

"Don't tell me you forgot?"

I paid no attention to Zaimokuza who looked at me as if I was an idiot. I took up a provocative attitude instead.

“…Hmph, as if. I have it alright… Right here.”

I pointed sharply at my stomach and Zaimokuza’s face was colored with shock.

“W-What!? You went out to eat… what a frightening man…”

Zaimokuza wiped the sweat at his brow and sent me a look of respect. Hmph, too ez.

But, there was one more person who didn’t fall for it.

“Then, guess you’ll be doing another run, huh?”

Totsuka smiled and demanded another errand. Phew, Totsuka’s super scary…

Chapter 7

Unexpectedly, **Miura Yumiko** is watching very closely

It was the second day of the field trip.

Today was where everyone would move together in their respective groups and the plan was to visit Uzumasa up to the Rakusei area.

The very first destination of the day was the Uzumasa Movie Village. The village was a finely created theme park and was often used as a filming location for historical plays. As a famous tourist location, not only did it replicate the Yoshiwara streets and Ikedaya, it boasted an abundant amount of enjoyable, tourist-minded attractions like a haunted house and ninja mansions that allowed you to experience history first-hand through cosplay.

We relocated to Uzumasa from the inn by way of the city bus.

The all-day bus pass was a formidable ally of all visiting students and tourists. For just the price of five hundred yen, you could ride the city bus for as much as you want. It was truly a free pass of your dreams. Particularly, as the bus network was quite expansive, you could literally hit almost all the city's model tourist attractions.

However, there was an unthinkable downside to all of this.

With autumn still in full bloom, the buses were incredibly jammed packed. The chances of riding the bus were about one hundred and fifty percent, I'd say. Due to how economic and convenient the bus was, many of the tourists would find themselves using it. My heart was on the verge of breaking from the human density of the commuting worker rush. I shall not work. No, I shall not…

If I have to deal with this dreadful feeling every time, to hell with a job!

In this absurd congestion, it made me worry for the weak and feeble girls and Totsuka; all the guys not withstanding.

But, due to the oppressive behavior of Miura and Kawasaki on the girls' side, the immediate surroundings transformed into a hot zone that ultimately protected both Ebina and Yuigahama. Yeah, well, those two are really scary…

As for Totsuka, he had moved into a safe buffer.

"Ha-Hachiman, are you okay? Sorry?"

He gave me an apologetic look as he stood between my arms.

"It's no biggie. Aside from all the elbows jabbing into me and all the people stepping on me, it's no big deal."

“My bad! Hikitani, my bad! But ya know, not much I can do here? Waaaay too crowded in here, for reals.”

Curse you, Tobe… Or so I thought, but Tobe had somehow managed his standing posture despite being pushed from the side and being stepped on from behind. So I couldn’t really get angry at the guy since it was just his elbow hitting me.

“Don’t forget we’re getting off at the next stop.”

Hayama called out. He’s quite the guy to have the luxury of worrying about others in this mess.

Eventually, the bus made its stop in front of the Uzumasa Movie Village.

We and the other visiting students and tourists squirmed our way out of the bus as if it getting spat out from the entrance.

We were already in bits and pieces before we were even had the chance to enjoy ourselves in the movie village.

In this condition, I would have welcomed a quick snack of the cinnamon whirl at the nearest Komeda Coffee while resting, but Tobe had already rushed straight ahead to prepare some tickets.

“Here ya go, Ebina.”

“Thanks so much.”

I see. You ran over there to buy the ticket just so you could hand her the ticket. As I stood there absentmindedly, Hayama and the others bought tickets as well.

“Oh, here’s one for ya, Hikitani.”

“…Yeah.”

Well, the guy seems super motivated, so I’ll try a little myself.

We went ahead and entered the movie village. The moment we passed the large gate, Pretty Cure had entered my field of vision, but being the adult that I was, I settled for just looking around in the interior of the park; I’ll check out the Pretty Cure the next time I come here by myself.

In various areas of the park were reenactments of the city linings of Edo. Occasionally, you’d see people, who may have been staff members, dressed up as samurais pass by each other.

There were things like the Courtesan Street or instructional sword fights that would suddenly start up and on top of that, a mysterious looking cutey dinosaur would spring itself up from a pond… A bunch of more things came up and it was actually starting to get a little fun.

In particular, the pond where the cutey dinosaur appeared from gave off this feeling that something was going to pop out. And then suddenly, the dinosaur would pop out followed by an explosion of smoke that would keep you apologizing on your knees. The smoke would then descend slowly downwards giving the attraction an odd feeling of surrealism.

A foreboding silence enshrouded us as we watched the cutey dinosaur sink back into the pond. It was so surreal that no one could lift a finger.

"…Let's go to the next one."

"Y-Yeah! Next, next!"

As Hayama suggested with a smile, the stiffened Tobe sprung back energetically.

"Why don't we go over there then?"

What Yuigahama was pointing at was the history themed haunted house. Apparently, it caught her eye at the very beginning.

Well, that's the standard. I suppose she was thinking of various things for Tobe and Ebina. Something along the lines of the suspension bridge effect or so they say.

We can at least expect something from the haunted house unlike that cutesy dinosaur.

You simply cannot take haunted mansions lightly. That's Toei for you. Not only did the monster set look like it was worked on with care, actual Toei employees also took up the role of being the monsters.

Someone was bound to not like it but no one in particular spoke up about it so we ended up in the line.

"Hayatooo, it's sooooo scary!"

Miura put up flirtatious airs and clung to Hayama. But you know Miura, you tend to look cuter when you give off the image of a mother taking care of her kids. I advise you to take a look again at your own charm.

"Yeaahh, I'm not too good with this kind of stuff too."

Hayama laughed embarrassingly to avoid the issue. With him displaying a moment of weakness, there were slight tugs at my heart since it was so rare.

Shortly, it was finally our turn. Having eight people entering at one time was really overboard after all so we decided to go in four at a time.

After Hayama's group disappeared one at a time into the mansion, it was my group's turn to enter the building.

The first part was the introduction. We were shown a video that warned us to be careful of any violent conduct such as punching and kicking any of the actors playing out the monsters. That actually just made it feel more surreal…

It was akin to a spoiler in a way and I was given the impression that this set was created with a lot of care, as of now anyway…

That was the thought I had in mind until it was time.

When we took one step inside, an unfamiliar atmosphere filled the air.

The motif was likely the Edo period no doubt.

We were only allowed the utmost minimum light in this pitch-black darkness. But, the light carefully guided our eyes in the direction of a freakishly looking symbol. And as soon as our vision became even more limited, in an obscure corner of the darkness laid a tool meant to fly out to scare people.

I calmed down and when I evaluated the situation, it was scary. Scary things were scary.

The repeating Buddhist prayers and resenting voices in this darkness made it difficult to ascertain how farther ahead the other group, whom were likely to be Hayama and the others, was, let alone see them.

As for why I could guess at that group being Hayama and the others were their characteristic conduct.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap, oh craaaaaaaaaah!”

Tobe, who was the type to get a hint, was absorbed in the atmosphere of the haunted house and because he was so freaked out, he had never left Hayama’s side since the beginning. When Ebina saw that, she chuckled in a creepy voice.

“Eek! Just now, a weird voice…”

Walking behind me was Kawasaki who tugged at my cuffs because she was scared out of her mind. Um, you’re going to rip my clothes off me, so could you stop? That was Ebina, so it shouldn’t be sc… Okay, it was scary.

When I glanced around at the props of the mansion, apparently it was modeled after a murder scene in a household during the Edo period.

It was standard for a haunted mansion, but the design was very on point. Yuigahama, who was walking next to me, stood with buckled legs and had her hands placed on my shoulders.

“I-I’m totally not good with this at all…”

As she said that, she looked around and appeared uneasy at the thought of something suddenly popping out.

“Ghosts from haunted mansions aren’t scary at all. Humans are the scary ones.”

“There he goes again with his smart mouth... But you’re kinda reliable right now.”

Moving past my theory, Yuigahama made a silly laugh, but it’s that, you know, humans are really the scary ones.

“…Basically, the haunted mansions designed to scare people are the scariest.”

“Oh gosh, he’s no good! Not reliable at all!”

Wait there, I’m actually scared right now too. If I were to come in here by myself, what I would have done was dash straight through the corridors all the while screaming “Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey! Heeeeeey! Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey!” in a strange voice just to drive the fear away. Ultimately, I’d end up not knowing where the exit would be.

At the moment, however, it was thanks to the others being so noisy that I wasn’t feeling as scared as I should’ve been.

It may have been the same for Totsuka as well since he showed no signs of being scared at all. Instead, he looked like he was having a lot of fun.

“Totsuka, you seem good and dandy…”

“Yup, I really like this kind of stuff.”

It may be dark, but the darkness cannot hinder my recognition of that gleeful smile. I thought for a second there that that luminance was something that could have relieved the world of its energy problems. The current period needs smiles, not oil!

After some progress in advancing forward, a monster (with a person inside) jumped out screaming “blaaah.” Kawasaki stiffened up instantly and dashed like her life was on the line without a word. Coincidentally, that surprised Totsuka as well who frantically ran as well.

As calm as I may have been, I was quite freaked out myself.

I huddled up reflexively only to come into contact with Yuigahama who was right next to me.

What actually happened was that our heads crashed into each other’s and the sound echoed throughout.

“Ugh…”

“Ouch…”

We both squatted and rubbed at the area where we bumped into each other.

“S-Sorry…”

“Nah, my bad, I was surprised there…”

As I apologized and turned to Yuigahama, the teared up Yuigahama stretched out her hands. She touched my head as if to confirm that it was there and proceeded to massage it.

“It didn’t hurt?”

“Uh, it really was painful…”

On second thought, this was really embarrassing so please stop. I adjusted my head and stood up so I could get away from her hand. Yuigahama stayed in her squatting position.

“Anyway, we should get going. We’ll be left behind.”

As she was about to stand up, I stretched out my hand. It seems that my skill that I used for my little sister Komachi back then automatically activated.

“Huh?”

Yuigahama looked at my hand mysteriously. Wait, this was something I’d do for my little sister. After reconsidering, I started moving my hand towards my pockets.

“Thanks.”

She grabbed my hand. Well, this is what you call kindness, also known as human empathy. An act of a gentleman. At the very least, it was an obvious thing to do as a person. I’m a gentleman so not much I can do.

That’s why I couldn’t shake off Yuigahama’s hands.

“Okay, then let’s get going to the goal.”

Yuigahama smiled cheerfully and softly let go of my hand. I had no time to think whether that was a shame as Yuigahama pulled me along by my shoulder.

“Hurry!”

In this chilly cold darkness of the blood stained haunted mansion, we moved on forward while headless and defeated soldiers chased us from behind.

“That looks like the exit.”

Light was leaking out from the final door. When we passed through it, a fresh breeze blew past us.

“It’s finally over… it was pretty scary…”

As if she was all fired up, Yuigahama instantly looked exhausted and after locating a bench, she staggered her way towards it. At her destination were Hayama and Totsuka who had already made it to the goal.

I followed after Yuigahama. Man, I feel super exhausted. It was really hard having to deal with my beating heart. Isn’t this what they call an irregular pulse? C’mon heart.

When I made it to the bench, I exhaled. After I relaxed, Totsuka approached me.

“Hachiman, that was really fun, huh?”

The smiling Totsuka started to make me feel dizzy. Now I’m dealing with lightheadedness.

That smile was too cute that it had healing properties. Feeling nervous, it felt like a lot of my feelings were about to reach a new stage as a set of all-stars.

“It feels like when you collapse from overplaying. Let’s go to the next one.”

Hayama looked at everyone. It seems there weren’t any objections. Miura, who was sitting on the bench, stood up with a rush of energy.

“Okay, I’ll go call over Ebina, mmkay.”

When she said that, she walked quickly over to the souvenir store. I thought everyone was here, but apparently Ebina and Tobe weren’t. I looked over in the direction of the store and there was Ebina spazzing out over the Shinsengumi goods and Tobe who was saying things like “oh a wooden sword, suuper expensive”.

U-Uh huh… did the haunted mansion work at all…?

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Our next destination was the Rakusei area. The plan to get there was by bus from Uzumasa.

However, the Rakusei was home to both Kinkakuji Temple and many other popular tourist spots. We were still in the middle of the autumn season as well, so the buses were more or less full.

On top of that, take into account the tourists on their way home from the movie village and we were without a doubt going to be waiting a while. Having seen so many buses go by, I was just about fed up with standing here and waiting in vain.

I am a man who hates fully crowded trains. Once upon a time, I had to make my way to a city college and halfway through the ride which coincided with the school commuting rush, I gave up. A history of not taking a mock exam, that's me.

That's why I wanted to avoid taking the city bus at all costs right now.

As I sat here going "kyoro kyoro, kue, kue" and pondering of a possible alternative to avoid the situation or a possible door somewhere, I looked around and what came into view was a taxi stop.

Hmph.

As strange that it may be, once people become aware of a more convenient alternative, they'd quickly pick the choice of self-indulgence without a hint of hesitation.

I tapped Yuigahama's shoulder as she stood next to me. She might have been tired evident by her meek reaction. She faced me with only her neck.

"What is it?"

"Let's use the taxi."

When I told her, Yuigahama frowned with a moan.

"Taxi? Aren't taxis expensive? Expensive is a no go."

As if that was that, she went back to waiting for the bus.

Gosh, what's with her? She was acting like a housewife… She was like that during the school culture festival too, but it seems her relationship with money seems to be rather strict…

But, as a house-husband myself, there was no way I could lose here.

Or how about this little aside: I could not stain my honor as the small change alchemist who pulled small change out from thin air.

"No, listen here. The capital has the image of being expensive, but as it turns out, in Kyoto, it's actually pretty cheap in comparison. The small taxis are mainstream

too. In fact, we'd be losing out on money if we don't take the taxi. If we split up the costs, it won't be expensive at all."

"Eeeeh…"

Hmm, this reluctant reaction. I figured I'd add some sound reasoning with my suggestion, but it seems that much more is needed to move Yuigahama's heart. In which case, I will change my approach.

"Hold on a second, calm down. There are demerits to us losing some time here."

"Like?"

Yuigahama responded in a way that seemed like she was just reacting to kill time while waiting. Damn her…

At this point, I needed to pull her in by appealing to her interests before starting anything else.

"Do you like Disney Land?"

"I do?"

Unlike earlier, this time she adjusted her upper body instead of just her neck to face me. I know plenty of things about Chiba just like any other person. Disney Land was, of course, included in that. The one thing in my expansive Chiba knowledge that would get fit along with Yuigahama's interest was definitely things related to Disney Land. That's why I went on the offensive with this.

"That place is known for being a date spot, you know."

"Uh huh, that's true."

Yuigahama nodded while mumbling in agreement.

"But now, I have a sad announcement to make."

"Eh, what?"

She turned her entire body my way as if she was absorbed into the topic. Having confirmed that, I continued on with the announcement.

"Couples who go to Disney Land on a date break up."

"Ah, I've heard of that before. Jinx or something like that?"

"Indeed. But, well, if you think about it, it's an obvious outcome."

In particular, there wasn't anything supernatural at work. It was simply a problem with human psychology.

"When the wait for an attraction gets too long, you can't help but start to get stressed. Even conversations will start to dry up. Once that happens, you'll get

irritated and the silence will continue to stockpile and the other person will start to get bored. It's basically the opposite of the suspension bridge effect."

"Haa, I see, I see~."

Yuigahama nodded frequently with a sense of admiration. It seems that I succeeded in persuading her. In that case, one last push will seal the deal.

"Doesn't our situation closely mirror that?"

"You and me, huh? I don't really think so."

Yuigahama responded with a puzzled look. No, no, wait, it's a little bothersome if you don't react the way I'm expecting.

"That's not it obviously… I'm talking about Tobe and Ebina here."

"Ah, r-right…"

Yuigahama hung her head in embarrassment from her misunderstanding.

"Take a look."

I waggled my finger and pointed to the front where the two were at.

Both Tobe and Ebina looked quite bored. Ebina would talk about random things with Miura and sometimes fidget with their phones. Tobe, on the other hand, was a little farther away from them and was swinging his wooden sword. Wait, he actually bought that?

"Y-Yeah…"

That was not an atmosphere you could ever say was good and after Yuigahama saw that, she crossed her arms in worry.

Well, I decided to add something else for insurance.

"I should add that taxis are closed room spaces. Their intimacy should increase."

In Conan's case, someone would probably die.

After I said that, Yuigahama was surprised.

"I-I see... I'll try asking them."

Yuigahama headed towards the group in front and called over to them with a wave.

"Do you guys want to try the taxi?"

When she started up, everyone had a dubious reaction. Not much we can do about high school students being against taxis. This was likely as a result of students having an ingrained expensive impression of taxis and also because, for students, taxis were not particularly a means of transportation they would think about in the first place. For now, I figured I'd try my hand at persuading them as well. I don't want to get in the bus full of people after all.

“If we take a small taxi, the cost won’t be that much if the cost is split between four people.

“I see.”

Hayama with his quick judgment was a big help. If you got the approval of the dependable leader, it was just a matter of time before the goons followed afterwards. Miura and Tobe had no complaints. Ebina nodded in agreement as well and went to grab ahold of Kawasaki. Totsuka looked in agreement as well and came along.

We left the line and headed towards the taxi stop.

Since there were eight of us, splitting the group into fours was the normal thing to think of.

As we walked towards the taxi stop, Hayama and Miura led the line followed by Kawasaki and Totsuka. I would act as a wall to separate the leading four from the remaining three behind me. So when we lined up for the taxis, one group of four would have to consist of me, Yuigahama, Tobe, and Ebina. At this point, the role of being the wall was important. No problem, in ball game tournaments, the one role that, without question, would eventually find its way around to me was defense. There were standards to be met when playing defense.

Hayama guided the group up to the taxi.

“Okay, let’s get in then.”

The leader Hayama suggested as he went ahead. It’ll be fine as long things went according to the flow.

“Aah. Okay, Yumiko.”

“Okaaaay.”

Once Hayama said that, Miura hopped in the car quickly. Hayama stood in front of the door and called the next person to board the car.

“Let’s go, Tobe.”

As soon as he called Tobe, he sprang out in response.

“Ah, rooooger. C’mon Ebina, let’s go.”

“Okay, okay. We’ll be going first then Yui, Sakisaki.

Tobe and Ebina went up to Hayama and got into the taxi one by one. Ebina waved to Yuigahama and Kawasaki as she got in.

“Ah, yeah, see you in a bit.”

“Don’t call me Sakisaki.”

Yuigahama responded with her own wave while Sakisaki blushed with a menacing look.

And lastly, Hayama headed towards the passenger's seat.

"…Okay, we'll be going ahead."

Hayama called out without the slightest glance at me. I'm sure there was something I could have said in return, but I was interrupted by the slamming of the door.

…Hmph, I see how it is.

Now then, since I was left behind, I had to round up these fellows into a taxi.

"So, where should we sit?"

Totsuka inquired, but the proper arrangements would be me in the front probably.

"Right, I'll take the front. You three in the back."

The door opened automatically and once I saw Yuigahama, Totsuka, and Kawasaki entering the taxi, I opened the door to the passenger's seat. I fastened my belt once I sat down.

"To Ninnaji Temple please."

I gave a brief command and the good natured looking driver smiled and repeated the destination.

The car started up quietly.

As we waited for the signals, the driver started up some small talk.

"Are you on your field trip?"

"Yes, that's right."

I momentarily looked in the driver's direction and gave a short answer. I wasn't intending to come off as cold, but I just wasn't used to these superficial conversations.

"Where did you come from?"

"In the direction of Tokyo."

A knowledge tidbit regarding the people from Chiba. When a denizen of Chiba goes to visit the rural areas and was asked where he or she came from, they'd end up answering "in the direction of Tokyo." I mean like, it'd be hard to get it across to the other person about Chiba when you try to describe it, you know… This was basically that; it was similar to when the residents of Kanagawa prefecture butt heads with the folks in Yokohama.

From then on, snippets of conversation continued on between the driver and me. I suppose taxis had this kind of trap too…

On the other hand, the back seats were drowned in conversations reeking of girls enclosed in a room.

“Right. And like, when you were about to get really serious in that pillow fight, Yumiko started to cry.”

“You didn’t have to mention that…”

The back mirror reflected Yuigahama who was having fun talking and Kawasaki who was in a foul mood while switching her crossed legs back and forth. Speaking of which, Miura cries way too much… Totsuka giggled and pushed the conversation with the happenings in the boys’ room.

“Oh, but pillow fights seem really fun. We played mahjong and UNO on our side. Ah, Hachiman also lost and forgot about his penalty game too.”

Our seat arrangements were partition so slightly but the conversation felt incredibly distant.

Guess they’re having a blast.

As for me, the driver was oddly being considerate and kept the talking to a minimum. All I did was space out as I gazed at the landscape of the city.

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Ninnaji Temple was well-known for being referenced in passage 52 of Tsurezuregusa where there was a monk with an embarrassed look that often shows up in textbooks.

The temple was a popular spot more so in spring than in fall. The reason being was apparently because the cherry blossoms would be in full bloom during spring.

Although it’s already late in autumn, there were still plenty of tourists around since the temples and gardens were still a sight worth checking out. But the sad reality was that we were just your regular youthful high school students.

Everyone could only say things like “this sure is amazing” or “it sure is” or “I guess it is kinda amazing”. Now where did everyone’s vigor at the movie village fly off to…?

That being said, I don’t know all the specifics regarding temples myself. The only thing I could utter was “Hooh, so this is the famous place from the

Tsurezuregusa…” to myself. Granted, Ninnaji Temple wasn’t exactly a focus in passage 52.

After briefly touring around the gardens and temples, everyone was emanating an “isn’t it about time we get going?” feeling.

With her sensitive nature, Yuigahama took a hint and prompted everyone.

“Mmkay, let’s go to the next one!”

As we made our way out from the temple, everyone was suddenly invigorated with energy akin to a mysterious phenomenon and followed Yuigahama, leaving Ninnaji Temple behind.

Now then, the next place of interest was Ryouanji Temple. On top of having such a cool name, this place was also famous for its rock garden. That’s even cooler. By the way, Tenryuuji Temple’s name was just as cool as Ryouanji. However, the name that was hands down the winner was a neck-to-neck tie between Konkai Koumyouji Temple or Kyouou Gokokuji Temple. Adashino Nenbutsuji Temple was more of a background character.

It only took approximately ten minutes to get to Ryuuanji Temple from Ninnaji Temple even by foot.

So we began trudging along on the road.

Red stained leaves fluttered in the air as they fell to the floor.

When walking in groups, it was a habit of mine to follow along from the back. Before I noticed, Yuigahama, who was supposed to have been walking in the front, had slowed her pace to walk alongside me.

“It’s not going too well, huh?”

She looked a little down as she murmured. This must’ve been about Tobe and Ebina.

“Damn right. It’s already a pain trying to keep myself in check. Like it’d be any easier doing the same for another person.”

“…That’s… true.”

“Besides.”

“Besides?”

Besides, the reason why it wasn’t proceeding so smoothly was mainly because of Yuigahama. It was a truth that couldn’t be sugarcoated.

Tobe’s natural disposition was one issue and Ebina not being remotely interested in Tobe at all was another. On top of that, there was one person who was acting in an incomprehensible manner.

There was no mistaking that that individual was one of the many obstacles.

But, they couldn't comprehend why that person was acting like that. It's just that there was no meaning to publicly announcing something you had no confidence in. Doubts and suspicion shouldn't be voiced, but rather, they should be kept bottled in. This applies especially to bad things. You've already lost the game if you blurted out a suspicion that turned out to be true.

Ultimately, if you were just being suspicious, then no one would be at fault at all.

I told Yuigahama who was waiting for a follow-up.

"Try not to be too forceful. If it's impossible, then it's impossible."

"But, I want to try my best."

Yuigahama's shoulders dropped slightly again and as her steps dwindled, she briefly kicked a falling leaf.

"Just don't do too much. It'd be bad if Ebina starts hating it too."

"I see…"

"It's basically that. Once the actual person feels like it, then it'll end up being more effective."

"Hmm…"

Yuigahama responded in a dispirited manner. No, like really, it's a real pain since it really is effective.

As we continued talking while walking, Hayama and the others were waiting for us ahead. It seems we've arrived at the front of Ryouanji Temple.

We checked in with the visitor's receptionist and upon entering the premises of the temple, a large pond came into view. It had the name Kyouyouichi and it took up about half of the premises and apparently was where the Heian nobles indulged themselves in entertainment such as sailing.

Fences made of bamboo were erected along the walkway and we ascended the rock stairs.

We entered the Houjou structure, which plainly speaking was a temple, and finally, we had made it to the rock garden.

It was the Karesansui Garden.

It was basically a garden style that primarily used rocks and other minerals without any water.

So I suppose the white sand was supposed to represent the water. Hmmm, I see. So it's something like that, the rock acts as the center of a ripple on the surface of the water, probably.

Due to all the walking, everyone showed signs of exhaustion and decided to take a seat while absentmindedly gazing at the rock garden. I decided to do the same and shuffled myself over to the corner of the bench.

When I did, the nearby person moved over and gave me some space. As I made a gesture to show my feeling of appreciation as if I awarded money, the person called out to me.

“Oh, what a coincidence.”

Hm? When I turned towards the person, the person sitting there was Yukinoshita Yukino.

“Aah, you came here too huh?”

“That’s right.”

On closer inspection, she was clearly with company; a tidy group of nice looking girls who sat next to her. The dubious looks they gave me made me feel a little uncomfortable… Well, I can’t deny that any form of interaction between Yukinoshita and me was a rare event in itself; truly an odd event.

But, from what I’ve seen, Yukinoshita was more of an eccentric herself normally.

Putting aside the fact that she had friends in the class, or maybe they weren’t, she seemed perfectly okay when moving as a group. Although, unlike how she spends her time with Yuigahama on equal terms, this looks more like a gathering of people who worshipped a single entity from afar.

Well, a person’s impression changes depending on how you look at them.

This rock garden was an example of that. Regardless of what position you look from, you won’t be able to see the entirety of the fifteen rocks it seems. So the position in which you look at will change how it can be viewed.

I’m sure the individual who created this garden had a more magnificent and philosophical goal in mind, but being the shallow guy that I am, I couldn’t think of a less contrived impression.

This world was littered with things that can’t be understood. The meaning behind the rock garden, a person’s true face, and the way people choose to involve themselves.

As I delved in speculative thought and observed the garden, Yukinoshita stood up only to sit back down.

Now that begs the question of why she stood up in the first place… or so I thought until she noticed my glance and started to say something.

“Tora-no-ko Watashi is another name for this garden. I was just wondering which part represented the tiger.”

Ooh. I guess she'd be interested since tigers were cats in one form or another.

Tora-no-ko Watashi huh… I stood up to see which part of the garden signified a tiger.

I see. I don't get it.

But, Yukinoshita looked like she was enlightened by something as she stared at the rock garden with calm eyes.

Well then, was this one of those times where I was supposed to say "how deep"? Still, the shallowness of my "deep" might have been abnormal.

We stared at the rock garden for a while.

"Ah, Yukinon."

At some point, Yuigahama was right next to us. When she noticed Yukinoshita, Yuigahama was about to sit in the space between me and her.

Yukinoshita stood up with a wry smile when she saw her.

"Let's move somewhere else, shall we?"

"Okay, let's talk over there."

Yukinoshita flicked her hair and turned around.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to be away for a bit. I don't mind if you go ahead."

When she called out to her classmates from class J, they all nodded obediently with eyes of admiration towards Yukinoshita. It's like a senior and junior relationship between classy women… Calling that being close was probably wrong as well.

As I speculated on Yukinoshita's relationship with her classmates, I heard a voice coming from above.

"What are you doing? Hurry."

Aah. Guess I'm going too. It was kind of scary when the stares of the girls from class J all focused on me when I stood up. I won't get stabbed by a Yukinoshita fan within a few moments, right? Should I prepare my Sunday mourning clothes tomorrow?

We exited the Houjou structure and wandered around the garden park. I followed the two from behind.

"How's the request coming along?"

"Mmm… It's turning out to be pretty hard."

Yuigahama explained the situation briefly when asked. After she heard the story, Yukinoshita casted her eyes downward with an apologetic face.

"I see. I'm really sorry having to leave everything up to you."

“Not at all. No worries at all.”

Yuigahama shook both of her hands in front of her chest. Yukinoshita smiled with a look of relief after she saw that.

“This might not be enough to call it a substitute, but I did do some thinking on my side.”

“Of what?”

When I asked, Yukinoshita looked my way.

“Places in Kyoto that girls would like. I thought they could serve as references for tomorrow’s free activity.”

“Ooo, that’s Yukinon for you. Ah, then, why don’t we go there together tomorrow too?”

“With Tobe?”

I get the feeling nothing’s going to be different than now if that was the case.

“No, no. I mean, we could follow them from behind in case they need help or something like that.”

“Can’t say that’s a very elegant method.”

Sneaking around from behind just to observe them wasn’t conduct to be praised for.

“Anyway, putting aside the following for now, as long I can make some recommendations, I think they’ll end up making it part of their sightseeing route. If something happens, we can just meet up too.”

So plan a date course through some suggestions, huh? Well, as long we’re close by and something goes wrong, they could contact us and we might be able to do something.

“It’s not the most foolproof plan, but we don’t really have anything else we can do.”

For now, the plan was decided. I have no clue how everyone’s going to act and how much of it will be to Tobe’s advantage.

Just as we circled around the garden, we returned to the front gate.

“We’ll be going to Kinkakuji Temple by the way.”

“I’ll be going back then.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow too.”

After we parted ways with Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and I met up with Hayama and the others. There were still other places we had to visit.

We walked up a shallow hill from Ryouanji Temple to Kinkakuji Temple. We walked past Ritsumeikan University and took the street that went back and forth.

It turned out that we ended up staying a long time at Kinkakuji Temple.

Eventually, it was past five in the evening. It was time to wait for the bus and return to the inn.

As the person in charge, Hayama called to report that they were going to be late. As a result, by the time we got home, the boys bathing time was already over.

As such, I had to settle for the indoor bath for the second day.

No, I should still be good. There was still the third day. It's not time to throw in the towel just yet—!

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The banquet hall was incredibly lively.

Why was it a tradition for high school boys on field trips during dinner time to start serving their own food like in old Japanese stories?

Thanks to that, I never managed to get much food myself.

It was just about time for the Mahjong tournaments to start up again in the rooms. Everyone chatted about how they passed the time last night at their seats during dinner and apparently every room indulged in Mahjong.

Because of that, today was the day in which the strongest contender would be seated as the top dog.

If I went back now, there was no doubt that I'd be dragged into the Mahjong tourney mayhem and this meant that I'd miss the chance to take a bath. And if I couldn't make it to the bath, the chances of a surprise meeting with Totsuka would plummet to zero.

In which case, the solution was simple. I could head back a little later.

In order to satisfy my empty stomach, I aimlessly wandered outside of the hotel. Getting caught meant a scolding but my optical camouflage (self-invoked) will come in handy here.

With not even an ounce of suspicion from anyone, I was safely able to make it to the convenience store at the turnaround of the street.

For the time being, I chose to partake in my usual custom where I would loiter around the magazine corner.

Uhh, Sunday GX, Sunday GX.

As I was searching, an oppressive voice spoke down on me.

“Ooh, look who do we have here, it’s Hikio.”

Before I was able to find the Sunday GX magazine that I truly loved and carelessly forgot to buy, I was caught first instead.

Due to the unpleasant way she called out to me, I turned towards her with deeply, rotted eyes.

But, Miura Yumiko, who called me Hikio didn’t bat an eyelash my way as she continued to stare at her magazine. So, why’d you call out to me then…?

Apparently to Miura, I was on the level of a natural phenomenon. In the same way you’d say “ah, it’s rain” when it starts raining, I could imagine that a similar line could be used with the same expression in this situation here.

Well, the current distance between us two was much more comfortable for me. If the other party wouldn’t bother to consider me at all, then I wouldn’t need to either.

I picked up the GX magazine without facing Miura. We stood there and flipped pages in sync.

“Like, you know—, what exactly are you guys trying to pull?”

When she suddenly spoke up, shivers ran up my spine.

I couldn’t stand it because her tone was always so scary… or so I thought and when I turned to face Miura, she had chosen a fashion magazine like usual.

However, as if she had noticed that I turned to face her, she arbitrarily continued the conversation.

“All that meddling with Hina, could you, like, stop it already?”

Miura kept her eyes glued to the page of the magazine as if she had forgotten the wisdom received from her education that a person should be facing the other party when speaking to them.

She flipped another page.

“You listening?”

I totally wanted to tell her that that was my line, but I never really did say anything in the first place, did I? So I repeated after her in response.

“I’m listening... We’re not really trying to meddle with her.”

“You totally are. You can tell just by looking.”

Miura quickly closed her magazine. It looks like she was ready to face me directly to talk.

“That’s, like, really bothersome you know.”

After uttering that line, she reached out for a magazine next to her. She softly removed the rubber band around the magazine and opened up the magazine. I don’t think you should be doing that… was what I thought but since I was doing the exact same thing, I kept it to myself. Then again, it’s Miura we’re talking about here so there was no way I could have said it to her anyway.

“Bothersome you say. There are people who want us to act that way though. It’s a problem of merits and demerits for someone. Just give up. Besides, it’s not like you’ll be directly affected in any way.”

“Haa?”

For the first time in this crude conversation that couldn’t really be called a conversation, Miura looked at me. The queen’s eyes were seething with hostility.

“It’ll affect us from here on.”

“……”

The words she uttered were beyond my expectations and left me perplexed. It was Miura that we were talking about here. Regardless of how bothersome it was to her, I was confident she’d confront the issue through her oppressive way of speaking. She’d then neatly break down every obstacle and provoke the other party by telling them to get out of her way.

My expectations were turned on its head. I didn’t think future tense would have such a strong implication. As if my face looked incredibly amusing, Miura stared at me.

“Say you, if you’re going out with Yui, then you should understand what the deal is with Ebina, right?”

“T-T-There’s no way we’re going out or anything…”

Being suddenly told information about my own well-being that I didn’t know, I hurriedly retorted in response. Oh gosh, what’s with this girl? What’s she saying out of the blue? I-It’s not l-like I’m going out with that girl or anything at all!

As the gross feeling of droplets of sweat trickled down my body, Miura looked at me and mocked me from the depths of her heart with a laugh.

“What exactly are you misunderstanding here? Gross. Like Yui and Hikio could be going out. That’s not the issue, you know? I’m talking about Yui once you actually talk to her. Gross.”

…You didn’t have to add that again to the end of your sentence, did you?

She wasn’t referring to the relationship between the opposing sexes but simply the association between acquaintances or friends.

But, that was one issue. I couldn’t pinpoint exactly what she wanted to tell me.

“What does that mean? I don’t think those two are all that similar.”

“Well, their personalities are pretty different after all…”

That Miura softened her glance ever so softly.

“Yui, you see, is the kind of girl that pays attention to her surroundings, you know? She’s been able to speak her mind a bit more recently though.”

It was just like Miura said. In the small time I’ve gotten to know Yuigahama, she was already sensitive to her surroundings and the people around her. In response to her surroundings, she’d situate herself in such a way that allowed her to establish a place for her to belong.

“Hm, that’s true…”

“Ebina’s the same way. She’s the same way, but kind of the opposite or something.”

A hint of loneliness was reflected in Miura’s smile as she put the magazine back on the shelf.

“She tries to fit in without reading the atmosphere.”

She was the same way as Yuigahama except the opposite. Ebina would try to assimilate with the group without paying attention to the atmosphere, a description that eerily fit her all too well.

“Ah, now that you’ve said it, I can see it.”

“Right. That’s why it can be dangerous. Ebina can be pretty crafty too.”

In other words, Ebina let her surroundings dictate her character which allowed her to keep the appropriate distance between people. She wasn’t an eccentric person, but she was merely being treated as an “eccentric”.

Miura had this urging tone as she continued speaking.

“When Ebina’s quiet, she’s a real hit with the guys and plenty of those guys want me to introduce them to her. She always refused to meet with them though. At first, I thought she was just being shy so I tried pushing recommendations onto her. And then, what do you think she said?”

“Who knows.”

I’m obviously not going to get this quiz if I’m not given any hints. Miura shrugged her shoulders and just as she was about to say something, she tilted her face slightly.

“ ‘Ah, sure, whatever.’ She said that while laughing. It was like she was talking to a stranger.”

As soon as Miura described it, it felt awfully real as it replayed in the depths of my head. The tone of her voice, her expression, and her look were all piercing cold and she couldn’t forgive the person for taking a step over the boundary that she set to maintain her distance of her own discretion.

“Ebina doesn’t really talk about herself and I don’t really ask about her either. But, I’m sure she hates it.”

That might be a bit wrong. If she was going to lose something, then she would choose to destroy herself instead. If trying to protect something will bring out about victims, she would rather give up and just throw it all away.

Even the current relationships she had now; she would definitely throw them away.

“You know, right now, I’m havin’ lots of fun. But if Ebina leaves, then we might not be able to stay as we are right now. We might not be able to do stupid things together anymore.”

Miura’s voice shook as she uttered her words.

“So could you butt out and not do anything unnecessary?”

This was probably, in the finest sense of the word, the first time she had looked at me properly.

What she had kept bottled in was clearly reflected in her gaze.

That’s why I answered her with my utmost sincerity.

“In that case, you don’t have to worry.”

“Why can you say something like that?”

Miura asked me as if it was a given. Indeed, a befitting response. Miura had no reason whatsoever to believe in any of my words. Whether it was having trust or having faith, the preliminary step in establishing trust little by little was building a common understanding between both parties. As this trust continues to inflate beyond shallow levels, then believing in and trusting in the opposing party becomes possible.

That level of trust between Miura and I was nowhere near that.

However, I was still able to confidently answer her back.

“No problem. Hayama said he’ll do something about it.”

“What the heck. Well, if Hayato says so, then that’s fine.”
Miura said that and laughed.

Chapter 8

Even so, **Hayama Hayato** can't choose for himself

It was morning on the third day of the field trip.

Today was the day everyone could move how they wanted. Since you weren't limited to just your classmates or your group, you could spend the entire day with other people like your club mates. Couples could even get together to spend their day fawning over each other too. It seems that you could also visit Osaka and Nara which meant that you weren't restricted to just Kyoto. As long as we were given autonomous freedom, anything was okay. Being alone was okay too.

This euphoric feeling caused me to fall fast asleep.

Halfway through, I remembered Totsuka attempting to wake me up, but my vague memory seemed to consist of me telling Totsuka "Go on ahead, I'll catch up." I even said it in a cool way too.

As a result, Hayama, Tobe, and Totsuka went on to have breakfast together and I decided to catch up on sleep in the little time that I had left.

But, I couldn't keep sleeping at this rate. It wasn't so much that I'd miss my morning breakfast, but the fact that we would be changing lodgings tonight. That meant I had to pack up my things and put it out in the lobby so it can be transported.

I said my farewells to the little futon that loved indulging in my inactivity and after I got up, I prepared my clothes. After finishing my business in the washroom, I changed my clothes while tidying up my luggage.

…Alright, with this finished, I just need to eat breakfast, return to the room, and then I'll be ready to go out. I was just about to go get my daily intake of breakfast so I yawned as I walked out of the room.

"Morning, Hikki!"

"Yo."

My brain was still in the middle of booting up due to the drowsiness, so I didn't question the reason why Yuigahama was at the door.

"Okay, let's go!"

She's so damn energetic this early morning.

"Aah, I need food… I think it was in the banquet hall. Was it the second floor?"

"No, no, I canceled morning breakfast."

“Canceled, huh… say what?”

Having heard words I wasn’t familiar with, I finally came to my senses. What do you mean when you said you canceled breakfast? This wasn’t a beat-‘em-up fighting game, so there’s way I’m going down without a fight.

“Canceled, you say? You know, a day’s worth of energy comes from breakfast. Skipping out on that isn’t very healthy.”

“You’re really serious about the strangest things…”

Yuigahama looked like she gave up on reasoning with me. Instead, she straightened up and started pushing me back into the room.

“Yeah, yeah, hurry up and get your luggage sorted so we can go out.”

“Wait, I’m still confused about what’s going on here…”

But, due to the fortunate blessing of having little luggage, I was already done packing up. It wasn’t a big deal, but I just did as I was told and went back into my room to get my luggage.

“Okay, let’s go put that in the lobby and get going.”

“Sure, let’s go do that, but food…”

I asked her but Yuigahama started humming looking excited to go around the city all the while not listening to me. She continued humming and went ahead.

Um… what about my food…?

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Recently, hotels have become more convenient, especially in tourist attraction areas. They offer services that provide transportation of luggage to different lodging locations. A similar service was utilized for the purposes of this field trip. We used that service to deliver our luggage to the inn designated as the lodging for the third day.

The inn was in Arashiyama, Kyoto’s most prominent and beautiful district.

Due to the amazing system in place, the carefree students were able to enjoy their freedom as much as they wanted.

I should add that right now, my stomach was also completely free; a consequence from skipping out on breakfast.

After we left the hotel, we walked for some time. It was often said that the city intersections of Kyoto were designed similarly to the intersections of a Go board.

Indeed, the streets extended outwards in a straight line and at the intersections were right angle turns to other streets. This may have been the reason why Yuigahama was able to proceed ahead without getting lost.

As I walked along with Yuigahama, a white colored coffee shop could be seen amongst the street stores. Next to that store was a Japanese-styled store but the signboard indicated they belonged to the same store.

“Ah, must be that.”

“What…?”

“The place where we’ll eat breakfast.”

“Eh, don’t we get breakfast at the banquet hall on the second floor?”

“Like I said, I talked to the teacher and canceled that.”

As Yuigahama said that, she entered the building which seemed to have been a café. Eh, you’re allowed to cancel things? I mean, sure, our school did give us freedom to do what we want, but wasn’t that a bit much?

This Japanese styled building had a courtyard inside and we made our way towards the seats on the terrace. At the terrace was a girl elegantly drinking her coffee, Yukinoshita.

“Oh, awfully late, aren’t you?”

“Wait, what? What’s going on here?”

My mind was still attempting to make sense of the situation and the only thing I could think of was how Yukinoshita drinking coffee on the terrace was so pointlessly fitting of her.

“It’s morning to you.”

“Well, yeah, it’s morning.”

Yukinoshita remained calm and nonchalantly started with an English vocabulary test, but I knew at least that much.

“I didn’t mean that. I was referring to the café’s morning set and morning service.”

“Aah, that famous thing Nagoya’s known for.”

Nagoya also had other local specialties like tenmusu and mountain. The people of Nagoya actually finished their sentences with “myaa—“ and Yukinoshita thought it to be very cat related, probably.

“…Well, if you know at least that, then it’s fine.”

“I guess Kyoto has plenty of places too huh?”

“Uh huh. I hear this place is super famous too.”

Yuigahama called over the waiter and quickly made her order.

That's true, with a store like this to be so exquisite in its appearance, there was no doubt it'd be famous with the girls. Oh, this must be what Yukinoshita meant by looking up recommendations tailored towards girls.

"I saw Ebina earlier towards one of the older buildings so they might have stopped by here."

"Ah, I guess Tobecchi's going with that route already, huh."

I see. Now that I had heard this much, I finally realized the idea behind these endeavors. It looks like what Yukinoshita said yesterday about researching about famous places that girls would enjoy was related after all.

Next, she gave that information to Yuigahama who passed it on to Tobe. With his head in the game, he extended an invitation to Ebina which was why they'd be here. Hmph, I guess he's trying pretty hard.

As I sat there putting the pieces together, the morning plate I ordered earlier had finally arrived.

The plate consisted of ham and bread, scrambled eggs mixed with salad, and coffee alongside orange juice. It was pretty standard around these parts but the way it was beautifully presented stimulated my appetite.

"Why don't we express our gratitude first then?"

"Right, thanks for the food."

"Thanks for the food."

We clapped our hands together. Still, it was a strange sight to see since this breakfast was very Western oriented.

While we ate, Yukinoshita explained what our plans were afterwards.

"First, we'll start off with Fushimi Inari Taisha."

"The tori corridor, huh?"

"Oh, that shows up on TV a lot."

When Yuigahama replied, Yukinoshita nodded. Not only was it famous, the vermillion archways that extended repeatedly were quite splendid. Well, I can see why it'd be famous with the girls.

"Next is Tofukuji Temple. We can stop by there when we walk back from Fushimi Inari."

"That's a first to me."

I was getting zero hits in my Japanese history database. It didn't seem to be a World Heritage landmark either. Yukinoshita gently placed her cup on the table and placed her finger on her lip as she thought.

"Well, that's not surprising. I don't think field trips include it as a place to go to very often…"

True, on field trips, the places you visit usually were predetermined. Kiyomizu Temple was an obvious choice for the first day but as you'd expect, many of the choices were chosen based on how much of Kyoto it represented.

Whether it was a famous landmark or part of UNESCO, those were expected. For other things related to the field trip, then relevance to Japanese history also was a factor. Checking out the things related to the Bakumatsu and Shinsengumi would be interesting. But, on the other hand, Honnouji seemed to give off a stronger impression of disappointment so that it was important to watch out for that.

"What's Tofukuji Temple famous for?"

"You'll see when we get there."

Yukinoshita smiled slightly. Being real suggestive, aren't you?

"After that is Kitano Tenman-gu."

…You actually remembered that from that pointless discussion?

"Sorry."

"It's for Komachi, isn't it?"

"What, what? How's Komachi related?"

Yuigahama asked while munching on her bread.

"We're praying for Komachi's success on her tests."

"That's a siscon for you…"

Call it sister consideration please.

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It was a sunny day as we looked over the city of Kyoto at the Yotsu-Tsuji of the Fushimi Inari shrine. We were at the mercy of the weather for these past three days.

"Oooh, this is amazing!"

Yuigahama voiced her admiration at the sight.

On the other hand, Yukinoshita, who was sitting on the nearby bench looking worn out, deeply sighed.

Well, that's understandable. As you progressed through the torii gates at the Fushimi Inari-Taisha shrine, you find yourself continuously going upwards. The height and the momentum of increasing steps of the stone path were honestly quite similar to that of a mountain.

Our current stop was actually just the beginning. There were still numerous torii gates that extended farther upwards. However, people who had even the slightest motivation to continue upwards for further sightseeing were quite rare. Just coming this far for a lot of people would have already been a feat in itself and they'd end up going back down afterwards.

We also had plans after this. So that's why we probably didn't have time to go up any further to the summit.

Not to mention that we had an individual who likely didn't have the endurance to go any further.

"Why don't we take a quick break?"

"Right…"

I sat down on the bench and helped myself to some tea. My body was a little hot from the climb so it was a refreshing feeling having the wind blow against me.

While we were resting for a bit, the amount of visitors slowly began to increase.

After a quick glance, Yukinoshita slowly opened her mouth.

"Why don't we start heading down?"

"Are you okay?"

"I've caught my breath so I should be okay."

After she said that, we proceeded to descend down the slope. Unsurprisingly, descending down the slope was a chore in itself. As it was approaching noon, we saw an increase in visitors since we crossed paths with a quite a few of them as we descended downwards.

I thought "finally" when we made it back to the bottom.

"It's quite crowded here…"

Yukinoshita spoke with a wearied tone. Unlike before when we were walking around, with this much people around, it was really starting to feel stuffy.

I’m guessing our next stops are going to be something like this.”

“……”

She didn’t say a word but I could already see from Yukinoshita’s discontent expression that she was starting to get fed up with the situation. I get the feeling I’d be able to get a 3rd degree certificate of approval from Yukinoshita today.

Whether it was just as expected or obvious, the next place we visited, Toufuku-ji Temple, was packed with people as well.

Toufuku-ji Temple was one of Kyoto’s prominent locations during the autumn season.

That goes without saying that it was a famous tourist spot, but unfortunately, the temple was situated quite a distance away from the center of Kyoto so people on a field trip would find it hard to stop by here.

Not only was it popular for its in-season scenery during the autumn season, another reason why it was popular was the Tsutenkyo bridge.

The bridge hovered over a small river that you could see from above and it connected the temples together. The very sight of this bridge would force an image of gradation into your very eyes. Because of that relaxing scenery, you couldn’t help but think how elegant the sight was.

Since we were well past the peak of autumn, this might’ve been the more preferable time for sight-seeing. Regardless, there were still a lot of people around especially at the bridge.

“Ah, it’s Tobecchi.”

In the crowd of people were Tobe and Ebina.

They were taking pictures with each other with the autumn scenery in the background. The man in charge of the camera was Hayama Hayato and despite being in a crowd of people, he still looked refreshing as ever. For a second there, I thought the quick flash came from his teeth but it was just the flash of the camera.

“Hayama and the others were with them too…”

“Since we didn’t see them in the morning when we were eating breakfast, they might’ve been moving around together.”

“Yeah, well, if it was just the two of them, it’d get awkward so in a way, having Hayato and the others there is more reassuring.”

“…But then there’s nothing different than usual.”

The only thing different here was where the four of them were having fun. If an uncertain element like me were to join in on that group and Yuigahama were to act like a matchmaker, then she could more or less stir up the group but…

“But, we can’t really break them up can we?”

Yukinoshita’s words cut my thoughts short. It was exactly as our princess says.

“Pretty much. It’d be pretty bad too if Ebina ended getting overly conscious of stuff.”

Her being self-conscious wasn’t the only troublesome problem. We also don’t want Ebina getting any more wary than she is now. We want to betray her expectations but also meet them. A fundamental basic of all entertainment.

“When someone thinks about confessing to you, you can actually tell that they’re going to do it based on how noisy people are around you. The teasing and laughing are all things that you can hear. That’s basically grounds for being called out.”

“Personal experience huh…”

Now that you mention it, while she may look like this, this beautiful girl Yukinoshita Yukino was quite popular.

“That feeling is very unbearable though.”

“Ooh.”

“It feels like a public humiliation. It’s quite bothersome.”

Yukinoshita continued as if it was pent up discontent from the bottom of her heart.

I’m sure Ebina had the same experiences as well. After all, she was a tidy-looking and pretty girl with black hair that any guy would fall in love with. In that case, it wasn’t odd at all for her to be sensitive to being with other guys.

“But, it doesn’t look like we’re going to get anywhere…”

Hm, even if we got a mood going, Hayama and the others were there too…

Hayama and company noticed us and waved his hands.

Yukinoshita and I ignored his gesture but Yuigahama waved back with a “heeey”.

The four approached us as if the hand waves were some form of signal.

“Hey.”

Hayama’s short greeting was likely directed at Yukinoshita and me, but Yukinoshita quietly looked at me. Hold on a second there, I’m not a translator, you know…

“What a surprise to see you here. You planning on going somewhere?”

When I fired a question with some lip service, Tobe spoke up in place of Hayama.

“We’re thinkin’ of going to Arashiyama.”

“Ah, I see. We’re going to go there ourselves after staying here for a bit.”

Yuigahama kept the conversation going naturally. This girl… wasn’t she the one that made the plans originally…? You can’t underestimate girl power.

Compared to the harmonious mood between Hayama, Tobe, and Yuigahama, it was like winter had come a season earlier on the other front.

“……”

“……”

Miura and Yukinoshita shot glances at each other in silence. It might’ve been my imagination but it felt like the scattered leaves were picking up speed.

I want to go home, they’re freaking me out…

When I averted my gaze, my eyes met with someone’s.

“Hikitani.”

It was a melodic but light voice. Although it sounded completely off-tune, it also sounded cheerful. Eventually, I realized that it was Ebina. No, you could say I knew who it was because of the way she called out to me in that voice.

If it was the usual Ebina Hina, I wouldn’t have noticed her at all, let alone with those gloomy eyes of hers.

She continued walking after she called out to me.

She looked like she planned to cross the Tsutenkyo bridge towards the garden. She swiftly continued past the crowds of people without looking back as if disappearing into the distance.

It looked like she was telling me to follow her.

In which case, the only thing I could do was comply.

The garden was beautifully dyed with the colors of fall and a crowd of people had stopped to take pictures of the scenery.

For someone like me who had the natural skill of avoiding people set to automatic most of the time, this level of crowding wasn’t a big deal. It’s just that having this skill meant that I wasn’t sure whether I’d find Ebina in this crowd of people or not.

In other words, she also had the same habit as I did.

At the end of the path where tourists would pass by was Ebina who would watch in passing. She was waiting for me with a smile plastered on her face.

When I finally caught up to her, I stood next to her and joined in on her in observing the flowing traffic of people.

“You didn’t forget about my request right?”

She quietly closed the distance between us with a step. It was a step that lacked any sort of presence.

I couldn’t react so I stepped away for a bit. Ebina abruptly spoke up as if she wasn’t fond of the silence between us.

“Well well? How’re the guys faring? You guys getting super along??”

Aah, there’s no mistake about it. It was that Ebina. The Ebina Hina that I knew and the Ebina Hina that everyone knew.

“…Sure, we’re doing pretty good. We’re playing Mahjong at night and stuff.”

What she really wanted out of me was completely different but I figured I’d just say it. And right then, Ebina pouted in front of me.

“But I’m not watching so how am I supposed to enjoy it!? I mean, like, you boys should get all tight together in a place where I can see!”

From just those words alone, I could pinpoint exactly what she really wanted to say.

And the reason why she had come to the service club with a request was exactly because of that.

Regardless, even if I was well aware of that fact, I still haven’t had the slightest idea of what to do about it. At least, not yet.

“Well, we’ll be going to Arashiyama too, so maybe then…”

I said it in a way to avoid making it sound like I’m buying time. At the very least, what I was planning to do would be decided in the next few hours.

“I’ll be in your care.”

The words that Ebina parted to me weighed heavily in my ears.

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Hayama’s group left Tofuku-ji Temple and headed for Arashiyama first while we decided to take a different route. This was because we were stopping by Kitano Tenman-gu on the way there for my own personal reason.

We paid our respects at Kitano Tenman-gu, bought charms and wrote on votive picture tablets.

I knew for a fact that I'd get called a siscon if they saw me scribbling on the tablet and I don't think I would've been able to deny it, so I had the two wait for me nearby.

"Sorry for making you wait."

"Not at all."

"Shall we get going to Arashiyama then?"

Arashiyama was one of the most beautiful places in Kyoto.

It was a place that showcased the brilliance of the four different seasons of Japan: the cherry blossoms of spring, the fresh verdure of summer, the autumn colors of fall, and the winter snow that blanketed the entire landscape with pure white. Supposedly, there was also mention of a hot spring but regardless, Arashiyama was truly the place that encompassed the great aspects of this country.

We used the Keifuku railway to get to Arashiyama. The antique exterior of the tram helped me feel the thrill of traveling.

We transferred lines at Katabiranotsuji Station and rode the train once again.

When we exited the train to the station, the sight of the autumn-dyed nature mosaics and the gradation of the outlines of the mountains came into view.

Oh, I see. So that's why the adults wanted to come here. I gasped with awe at the sight.

"……"

Even Yukinoshita had her breath taken away.

We took a quick detour towards the Togetsukyo Bridge. After a quick visit to the Orgel Museum in the area, we proceeded to head in the direction of Sagano.

As we continued on the street, it was bustling with activity with rickshaws coming back and forth. The street we continued on was connected to another street where various stores lined up on the side.

The street looked somewhat fancy and clean and the lines of stores gave off the impression of mostly junk food. When we walked along the street, the aromatic smell attracted our attention.

Yuigahama's that is.

She stuffed her face with croquettes, fried chicken, and beef manjus. W-Well, she hadn't eaten anything since the afternoon so there's no helping it. Let's just consider this as her afternoon lunch.

Yukinoshita looked at Yuigahama with a face of fear and she looked like she wanted to say something. She let out a reserved sigh and spoke.

“You won’t be able to eat anything during dinner you know…”

Yukinoshita reprimanded her like a mother to Yuigahama’s surprise. Because of this, Yuigahama stretched out some of her junk food to me timidly.

“Eh… then I’ll give this to you Hikki.”

“Don’t want any…”

What’s with this girl trying to give me small bits of pieces of her food…? If it was at least half of it, then I wouldn’t have minded eating it.

Yuigahama stared at the croquette and manju in both of her hands and looked at Yukinoshita with a troubled expression.

“Umm, what should I do with this, Yukinon?”

“Ha… Just a little then.”

Seeing Yukinoshita nibble at her food was something you'd see once every full moon and I couldn’t help but stay fixated on her. It was similar to that feeling of taming those fox-squirrels that weren't comfortable being around humans.

As I observed her, Yukinoshita shot back a glare.

“You help out too.”

“Ha, is there anything I can eat?”

“Ah. This one then.”

Yuigahama broke the beef manjuu in half and gave it to me. Hm, doing it that way works too. I accepted it without complaint and tossed it in my mouth. As I chewed on my food, Yuigahama breathed out.

After that, Yuigahama once again broke the croquette in half and gave it to me looking confident from earlier. It felt like I was getting fed here. In fact, this wasn’t a bad feeling at all. The food that was earned without working was delicious.

We headed for the Arashiyama street as we ate.

We continued straight without turning onto the street that led to Tenryuu-ji Temple.

A gust of wind could be briefly heard coming from the right side.

When I looked up, I was met with dense and verdant bamboo branches that grew overhead. The leaves that were attached gave rise to the earlier sound.

I had absolutely no idea how many bamboo branches were growing but this path that looked like a bamboo tunnel, seemingly continuing on forever, had us walking shoulder by shoulder.

Sunlight that had penetrated through the gaps of the numerous bamboo trees exuded a sense of tranquility. With the calming sound of nature, the entirety of the small path was submerged in an atmosphere of relaxation.

It was the bamboo forest trail that was often seen in Arashiyama tourist guides and on television.

The progression of the trail couldn't have been simplier and the ongoing bamboo forest looked like it was going to suck us in. Due to the end being nowhere in sight, it felt like gazing into the depths of a labyrinth.

"Wow, this is pretty amazing…"

Yuigahama stopped in her tracks and looked up. The sunlight extended through the small gaps of the bamboo foliage down onto the path and Yuigahama slowly closed her eyes.

"It is. Try looking below you."

Yukinoshita approached the brushwood fence. When she entered the shadows of the bamboo forest, the sound of rustling bamboo foliage could be heard. She pointed in the area around her feet.

"Lanterns, huh?"

"Right. When it becomes dark, the entire path gets illuminated."

The verdant bamboo forest and the warm light of the lanterns. Because of that contrast, Arashiyama at night was probably a beautiful sight to behold. This caused me to remember the scenery from traveling magazines that I would occasionally look at.

Yuigahama looked like she was under the same impression and merrily frolicked around.

"This is the place! I think this would be a good place! Probably!"

"For what?"

What ever could she be talking about? Not only did she forget to include the subject, she even added "probably" at the end too.

When I asked, Yuigahama abruptly stopped and hung her head in embarrassment.

"L-Like for being confessed to."

Why in passive voice…?

Yukinoshita smiled in response to Yuigahama's funny behavior.

"The atmosphere here is quite wonderful. As far as places go, this place seems like a suitable spot."

“I-I know right!”

“So that means Tobe should try taking up the challenge here, huh?”

Night time was approaching. If what Yukinoshita said was true, then the entire path should be illuminated by the light of the numerous lanterns extending down the path.

A cold, autumn wind blew throughout the bamboo forest.

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After finishing up the last dinner of the field trip, I went back to my room.

As it turns out, it was actually my class’s turn to bathe. But the time in which the bamboo forest would light up was limited. So if we wanted to go out, the appropriate course of action was to skip the designated bathing time and sneak out.

Tobe was acting jittery in the room that we stayed in.

“Uaagh, crap. Gettin’ super nervous here. Crap.”

Yamato slapped Tobe on the back. Tobe had a coughing fit as if he somehow received a heavy shock. Yamato looked at him with a stern expression and spoke with a deep voice.

“You’ll be fine.”

“Tobe with a girlfriend huh? We won’t be able to mess around like we usually do anymore.”

Oooka glanced at Tobe as he said this. Tobe reflexively responded.

“That ain’t true. Whatever, now’s not the time, crap.”

He resumed his nervous state once again. Yamato slapped him in the back a second time.

“You’ll be fine.”

At this rate, they’ll be stuck in an infinite loop of the same exchanges. These guys looked like they were having a lot of fun though.

“I’m starting to feel kinda nervous too now.”

Totsuka’s a good kid. I started to get a little nervous as well and I felt like I could kill a mosquito at any moment right now.

Hayama, who was silent the whole time, slowly stood up.

“…Hey, Tobe.”

“What’s up, Hayato? I’m like totally all hyped up right now ya know?”

“No, nevermind…”

Their inarticulate conversation began to get light-hearted.

“What’s up man~?”

“I was going to tell you to give your best but after looking at your face, I didn’t feel like it anymore.”

“Ain’t that a bit cruel!? Ah, but wait up, I’m not gettin’ so nervous anymore.”

Hayama kept his gloomy expression from being seen by Tobe and left the room.

…Regardless of whether he stayed here or not, Hayama’s attitude wouldn’t have changed.

During the field trip, maybe possibly way earlier, Hayama’s attitude was quite odd. Hayama, who always flawlessly kept from aggravating things, couldn’t have possibly noticed this abnormality of himself. But this time, he was being too obvious. Too obvious that even someone like me could notice.

I left the noisy room and followed after Hayama.

I called out to the back of the man who was headed for the riverbank. Calling out to you was literally a service from me so you better be grateful.

“You’re being awfully noncooperative.”

“Is that so?”

Hayama answered without turning back. It looked like he was expecting me to follow him and because of his laid back attitude, I was starting to get annoyed myself.

“That’s right. It feels like you want to get in their way too.”

At the very least, the Hayama Hayato that I knew was a human being that, regardless of the time and place, would choose a near correct answer. He was a guy who stayed within the realm of his own reasoning so much that he was bounded by it. Or so I thought.

That was why I felt something was out of place when Hayama chose to actively avoid the choice of cheering his friend on.

“That really wasn’t my intention though.”

Hayama had a strained laugh as he turned around. He’s lying through his teeth.

“Then, what did you want to do then?”

“…I’m happy with the ways things are right now. I really like the time that I spend together with Tobe, Hina, and everyone else.”

Hayama spoke in a stoic fashion without the slightest hint of embarrassment.

“That’s why,”

Hayama stopped.

I already knew what he wanted to say even if he wasn’t planning to finish his sentence. What I wanted to say in return was already set in stone.

“…If your relationship goes downhill from just this alone, then maybe it wasn’t that kind of relationship you thought it was.”

“You might be right. But… the things you lose won’t come back.”

He spoke as if he was looking back on past experiences. I wasn’t the type to ask about the deeper implications behind what was said. Whatever happened to Hayama in the past, I had absolutely no interest in.

Hayama looked like he didn’t want to expand on the subject any further. He tried to hide it with a laugh.

“We might be able to just pretend it never happened. We’re quite good at that after all.”

“That doesn’t mean everything will go away.”

I quickly retorted. I hadn’t realized that my words were full of conviction.

In this world, there were times where you couldn’t forget about the things you regretted.

There was even the phrase “you can’t undo what’s done”.

We were speaking normally with each other yesterday but suddenly, an unfathomable distance grew between us and we never spoke to each other again after that. We even stopped texting each other despite having done it so often.

That was fine by itself. Not only would our smiles be stiff with each other, we’d put enough confidence in them to relay “there’s nothing wrong, we’re acting like proper friends, aren’t we?” to each other.

Even so, the conscience that lurked in the corners of our minds just wouldn’t go away and somewhere, there was this feeling of restraint that we couldn’t get rid of. Eventually, we grow farther apart and that was the end of it.

Hayama closed his eyes and began to talk.

“It’s just like you said. I’m sure Hina’s probably thinking the same thing.”

“Obviously. If anything, there’s something wrong with you guys for wanting to continue having fun in that charade of yours.”

I lightly kicked a pebble at my foot in a small fit of anger. The pebble that I kicked flew over to Hayama. He picked it up slowly and stared at it. It was like he was trying to avoid looking in my direction.

“I wonder… I don’t think it’s like that at all. Our current relationship that we have is everything to me right now.”

“No, it is. Then, what does Tobe think about it? He’s trying pretty hard you know. Are you not going to give him any consideration at all?”

I pushed Hayama along with my words and he squeezed the rock in his hand.

“I told him many times to give up. That’s because I don’t think Hina right now would open up to him at all… Even so, we can’t predict what’ll happen down the road. That’s why I didn’t want him to try to get everything over with so fast.”

Hayama faced the river and threw the pebble. The pebble bounced atop the water surface numerous times before finally sinking below.

“The things you don’t want to lose are more important than the things you can gain.”

Hayama gazed at the water’s surface as if he was trying to trace the whereabouts of the pebble that he threw. He kept looking despite knowing full well that he wouldn’t have been able to find it.

Ultimately, Hayama and I began discussing the things that you could lose. Hayama said several things.

He was well aware that you will lose things eventually. Regardless of the type of relationship, that, too, will end as well. If it was really important as you claimed it to be, then you would try your best to avoid losing it or so he said.

But, that was just sophistry.

“You sure like running your mouth. As far as I can see, you look like you’re doing everything for your own personal benefit.”

“Then!”

Hayama’s sharp voice reverberated. Hayama glared at me with a distinct look of anger. I returned his glare straight on.

When I did, Hayama looked like he tried to hold back the shame from getting overly excited and sighed deeply. He slowly began to talk.

“Then, what would you do? If it was you, what would you do?”

“Don’t try to shift the subject to me…”

If it was me, then… or not. Thinking about it was pointless. I was different from Hayama. Of course that included Tobe as well.

Pondering what I would do in his situation was nothing but wasted effort. That's why I didn't want to talk about it.

"So basically, you don't want anything to change."

"…Yes, that's right."

Hayama spat his words out. His voice was diluted with anguish and impatience which was something you wouldn't expect from Hayama normally.

It's just that.

That feeling of not wanting anything to change.

At the very least, I could understand it.

I mean, I had to.

When you wanted to get your thoughts across, it wasn't always the correct choice to lay bare your entire life story.

A relationship where you couldn't move forward. A relationship where you couldn't forgive others for stepping over into your domain. A relationship where you couldn't forgive the person for trampling all over you.

In dramas and manga, there was always a happy ending for those who crossed over that line. But reality wasn't so kind. It was much more cruel and apathetic.

There wasn't anything else important. The moment you lost the things that were irreplaceable was the moment you realize that you'll never be able to obtain them ever again.

As I am now, I couldn't call Hayama a coward, let alone make fun of him.

You could say his inability to move forward was the correct choice. If it was for the sake of his happiness, then it was fine.

The words that could deny the entirety of his answer wouldn't come to me.

I couldn't figure out what was wrong.

As I stood there without a counterargument or rebuttal, I heard a short and resigned sigh.

"You're exactly right… This is just me being selfish."

As Hayama Hayato said that, he made a lonely laugh.

That laugh rubbed me the wrong way.

"Don't look down on me, Hayama. I'm not one to easily believe in the words of others."

I was the type of guy who looked beyond what was said. The owner of that worthless personality was me.

“That’s why I don’t believe you for a second when you say you’re being selfish.”

“…Hikigaya.”

Hayama’s expression was full of shock. It wasn’t exactly anything to be shocked about.

I imagine there were other people like who wanted the same thing.

And that there were other people like me.

And girls who lie and put up a façade in order to protect something.

Hayama Hayato doesn’t want to hurt anyone. The reason why Hayama couldn’t act was because he knew someone was bound to be hurt.

The one step that he could take would ultimately hurt someone which would lead to something breaking.

Exactly who had the right to deny the justice of those who agonize over their decision to try to protect something?

All of us were living in this laughably narrow world with a limited amount of time.

It doesn’t need to be said that our time as high school student wouldn’t last forever.

Who had the right to criticize you for wanting to value the limited time you had left?

It was understandable wanting to not lose anything.

What I needed to do was already decided.

Hayama Hayato can't choose anything. There were too many things he had within his grasp that he held dear.

Hikigaya Hachiman can't choose anything. Rather, there were no alternatives because there existed only one choice.

As ironic as it was, Hayama and I were similar in the regard of “not being able to decide”, but everything else was completely parallel.

The things Hayama wanted to protect were things I couldn’t understand.

But it was better that way. That’s why there were things that only I could do.

Hayama called out to me as I left with my back turned against the river.

“I really didn’t want to rely on you for this too…”

The same goes for me too, you bastard.

Love and friendship were things adored by the masses. But that was a limited right granted to the winners.

The cries of the losers fell on deaf ears.

In that case, I will take them all in. I will sing out with all my might.

This was a ballad of those who agonized in silence.

This was a requiem for those who could only put up a brave front even if they were charmed by and attracted to someone.

Chapter 9

His and her confession won't reach anyone

Stretching along the trail of the bamboo forest were the glows of the staggered lanterns.

The dim, white glow of the lanterns reflected against the verdant bamboos every couple feet. With the evening sun setting below the horizon, the moon that climbed up in the sky illuminated the entire vicinity with its faint light.

If kindness was visible to the naked eye, then this was what it might've looked like.

This spectacle was presented in a dramatic fashion that encompassed a mixture of coincidence and chance. It was so beautifully woven together that there was no way you could call this anything but kindness.

This was the stage prepared for the sole sake of Tobe.

What made this possible was because everyone had told small lies.

The one who was in charge of calling out Ebina was Yuigahama. She likely tacked on some arbitrary reason but her role was to guide her here.

Even Ooka and Yamato were lying about something as well. That is, their intentions weren't pure. Instead of being here to support their friend, they were here just for their personal enjoyment but they were holding themselves back, evident by their meek expressions.

As for Miura who wasn't present, she was without a doubt pretending to act ignorant of the current situation; she wouldn't ask about it, try to stop it, or pay attention to it.

Hayama couldn't support his friend even if he wanted to. Even so, he was still here.

Everyone told a lie.

But within this group of liars was just one person who didn't lie. Yukinoshita, with an expression colder than usual, was here as well.

We were all awaiting Ebina's arrival within the inner most interior of the bamboo forest.

Hayama, Ooka, and Yamato were positioned in a spot where they could prevent interference. Tobe was repeatedly breathing in and out while gazing at the other end of the trail. When I called out to Tobe, he was completely stiff from the anxiety of standing still while eagerly waiting for Ebina to come.

“Tobe.”

“Hi-Hikitani… like, this is baaad. I’m like crazy nervous right now.”

He gave me an awkward smile.

“Hey, what are you going to do if she turns you down?”

“Ya know, sayin’ something like that before the actual thing’s a bit cruel, yeah? Ah, I don’t feel nervous anymore… Oh I see, were you testin’ me again?”

“Whatever, just answer. Ebina will be here any minute.”

My tone indicated I wasn’t interested in small talk and it sounded unexpectedly strict. When Tobe caught on to this, his expression hardened.

“…Well, I guess I gotta give up then.”

Tobe’s gaze was fixated on the trail ahead of him.

“Ya know, I have this laid back personality right? So all I’ve ever done is just hang out with people just because. But this time I’m super serious.”

It was enough for me just hearing those words. That’s why I was able to tell him in a tone that didn’t reek of lies.

“…I see. In that case, give it your all until the very end.”

“Ooh! I knew you were a great guy Hikitani!”

“That ain’t it, idiot.”

I fended off Tobe’s hands that hit my back and went back to my original position. It was our special spot that Ebina wouldn’t have been able to notice from the bending trail she was arriving from.

When I made it back, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita spoke to me.

“Hikki, there’s some good in you after all.”

“What brought that on, I wonder?”

They both smiled and spoke with a teasing tone.

“It’s not like that, like really. At this rate, Tobe’s going to get turned down.”

When I answered back, their expressions sank slightly.

“That might be right.”

“Yeah… Right…”

However, I had a response ready for that particular situation.

“For the time being, I’ve thought of something that’ll settle everything peacefully.”

“What is it?”

Yuigahama tilted her head and asked. But, I honestly didn't want to talk about it. She may have had noticed my slight hesitation but Yukinoshita let out a short sigh and wore a small smile.

"…Well, we'll leave it up to you."

Yuigahama also nodded in agreement. I'm quite grateful that they didn't dig any deeper.

As we were talking, Ebina, who was called here, could be seen.

We sent out Tobe from the edge of the path.

Ebina continued past the lanterns one by one until she finally reached up to our position.

Tobe greeted her with a look of anxiety on his face.

"Um…"

"Uh huh…"

When he called out to her, Ebina responded weakly.

Just watching from afar was making my chest hurt.

First thing's first, Tobe was definitely going to be rejected.

And then, the two will avoid looking at each other in the classroom. They'll fake their laughter and gradually build up a wall between each other and then it'll become natural for them to stop meeting with each other. They might even go as far as changing classrooms. But, the ending that awaited them would likely be the same no matter what.

But as hopeless as this reaction may have been, just maybe the future may have something else in store.

Was Tobe fully aware of that kind of possibility? Was he fully aware of the risk that he may lose the current relationships he had now?

It was likely Tobe had prepared himself for all of this.

But, that was only one side of the coin.

Tobe wasn't the only one who cared for their current relationships.

Even the group of people that both he and she belonged to had stakes on the line.

That's why she had that kind of request.

That's why he was agonizing over this.

There was only one thing to Miura's request. She didn't want to lose anything. While they might have been looking in different directions, the one thing they wanted to keep within their grasp was all the same.

“I, the thing is.”

“…….”

Ebina couldn’t say anything in response to Tobe’s voice. Ebina stood there quietly listening to Tobe with her hands gripped together in front of her. Her expression was distinctly cold.

Aah, that was the exact expression I was expecting.

If I wanted to do something about the request, then there was only one path I could take.

I needed to make it so Tobe wasn’t directly rejected such that the relations in the group weren’t strained and so that he could still stay on good terms with Ebina and the others.

In that case, there really was only one possible method.

Timing was important. And the impact had to be huge.

I needed to slam something against them from their blind spot; something that’ll turn everything upside down. Try to think of something that’ll completely grab their interest; something that’ll take the initiative; something that’ll instantly change the atmosphere.

Damn it, it really sickens me when the only thing I could think up were these foul methods, let alone the fact that I got one upped by Zaimokuza earlier. Damn it, it pisses me off having to owe that guy anything.

“U, um, ya see…”

Looking determined, Tobe spoke.

At that moment, things were already in motion.

Ebina’s shoulders shook in response to Tobe.

Just ten more steps.

Tobe’s cut his words short and he gazed at Ebina.

Will everything happen in time?

Ebina shifted her eyes to the lanterns at her feet.

Now was the time to say it.

“I’ve liked you since a long time ago. Please go out with me.”

When she heard those words, Ebina stared in wonder.

That was the obvious reaction. Even I was surprised.

Even Tobe was surprised.

Tobe stood there dumbfounded because the words he wanted to say were snatched away by me.

Ebina was bewildered at my sudden confession but she eventually gave the correct response.

“I’m sorry. I don’t really want to date anyone right now. No matter who confesses to me, I definitely won’t go out with any of them. If that’s all, I’ll be going back now.”

Ebina bowed her head slightly and left the area in a jog.

Tobe was frozen stiff with his mouth wide open unable to move. He couldn’t even muster anything because his timing was thrown out of balance. The words from earlier still had him in shock. His head, however, rotated inch by inch in my direction.

“You heard her.”

I shrugged my shoulders as I told him. Tobe pushed up his hair and shot me a glare of jealousy.

“Hikitani… Ya can’t just do that, ya know. I mean, I didn’t get rejected but…”

He kept repeating “no way” like a parrot that was trained only to say “no way”.

Hayama was nearby checking on the situation and when he walked up to Tobe, he poked him in the head.

“It just means it wasn’t your time yet. So why not just enjoy what we have right now?”

“I guess so. Huh, did you just say now?”

Tobe let out a small sigh.

He then dragged himself up in front of me and lightly hit my chest with his fist.

“Hikitani, sorry, but I ain’t backin’ down.”

Tobe pointed at me with a charming smile and started to walk off looking satisfied of himself somewhere. Waiting ahead was Ooka and Yamato. They stood shoulder by shoulder and gave him pats on the back and Tobe took his rightful baptism.

Hayama followed after Tobe.

In the moment he passed by me, he whispered something that only I could hear.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

“I was fully aware that this was the only way you could do things too… Sorry.”

The expression he looked at me with was as if he pitied me. It wasn't a look of gloat or ridicule. It was as if he thought I was pitiful and sympathized with me.

I was filled with shame and anger that I had to hold back my own fist to avoid them from flinging out at Hayama.

Even though Hayama had already gone away, that look of his was engrained in my head.

Once those guys hurriedly left the scene, I could feel the tension in the air dropping.

The only ones left were Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and me.

There was a small distance between the three of us. Now that it was over, I felt a surge of relief and I walked in the direction of the two, looking to go back to the hotel.

However, Yukinoshita stood planted in her position and glared at me.

It was an interrogative, cold stare and that alone caused my legs to grow weak. Hey, hey, don't tease me too much. I already took a surprising amount of damage from what Hayama said to me earlier.

But there was no way that would get across to them.

Regardless, the sharpness in her eyes did not dull for a second. On the side was Yuigahama who was looking down not knowing what to do.

"…I hate how you do things."

It wasn't only until a little after I approached them did Yukinoshita say something.

Yukinoshita pressed against her chest and continued to glare at me.

Her eyes seeped with anger that had no direction.

"I can't explain it very well and it's really irritating but… I really hate how you do things."

"Yukinon…"

The one who looked upon Yukinoshita's heartbreaking appearance was Yuigahama. The gulping sound coming from Yuigahama sounded as if she swallowed something down and returned to looking back at the floor.

As I stood there without responding, Yukinoshita tried to say something in return as if this was a verbal argument but no words came out. She brought her lips together as if she was biting on them.

The red leaves danced in the wind. Yukinoshita averted her gaze from me as if following after those leaves.

“…I’ll be going back first.”

Yukinoshita stated with a cold tone and turned around to leave. She left in a quick pace as if she wanted to get away from here as fast as possible. Even if I ran after her, I wouldn’t have been able to catch her.

The only one that was left, Yuigahama, laughed weakly.

“W-Why don’t we go back too?”

It was a tone needlessly trying to be energetic. Being this understandable was a big help.

“…Right.”

I answered and began walking. Yuigahama followed me but was a step slower. In an attempt to try to bury the silence, Yuigahama tried to keep a conversation flowing.

“Like, yeah, I think that strategy wasn’t so good. I mean, I was surprised and even Ebina lost the chance to say anything too.”

“Yeah.”

“But, yeah. I was really surprised. I thought you were serious for a second.”

“Like hell that’d be true.”

“I know right. Ahaha…”

As the irrelevant conversation progressed, we approached the exit of the trail and the sound of Yuigahama’s footsteps stopped.

“But.”

The words that were suddenly cut off made me stop. When my cuffs were suddenly tugged at, I reflexively turned around.

“But, you know… this kind of stuff, you can’t do that anymore.”

I wanted her to stop laughing like that. It was so painful and heart-breaking that I couldn’t bear to look anymore. I averted my gaze quietly.

That look of pity. That anger that was directed at me. And that kind of smile. I withstood it all.

“That was the most effective method. That’s all it was.”

Those were the only words that could come out of my mouth. It was possible for me to explain myself logically. I even had the confidence I could sugarcoat my words in all kinds of ways to justify my actions. Even so, those words at the bottom of my stomach continued to degenerate more and more.

“It’s not about being effective or anything…”

Although she was facing downwards, I could still hear her voice clearly.

“There were people who wanted the problem resolved. Obviously, there were also people who wanted everything to stay the same, but satisfying everyone was impossible. That meant compromise was the only option.”

What I said made me completely aware of myself. Aah, this was sophistry. It was nothing more than an excuse for the responsibility of my actions to someone that didn’t exist; a false pretense. It was the one thing that I hated the most in this world. That was deception.

There was no way Yuigahama would realize this.

I could hear a sound similar to a sobbing voice.

“Tobecchi didn’t get turned down and can hang out with Hayato and the other guys just like usual. He won’t have to be worried about Hina too… Starting tomorrow, everything will be the same as always. They might even be okay with not changing.”

Her trembling voice wouldn’t allow me to object. Her shivering fingers wouldn’t allow me to make a move.

Unable to face her directly, the only thing I could do was stand still in silence.

“But, but you know…”

The reserved grip she had on my cuff was loosened. But, she quickly grabbed my cuff once again, but this time with a lot more strength.

“You need to think more of how others feel…”

What followed her words was the sound of her light breathing.

“…Why do you understand everything but that?”

I get it. That is, if something changed, there was no going back.

Whatever kind of form or shape that may have turned into, it was impossible to take back what was done. I can guarantee that.

But, my blazer that Yuigahama held on to was awfully heavy.

Even though she was just squeezing it with a trivial amount of strength, my shoulders felt awfully heavy. It felt like I would crumble if I were to loosen up.

“That kind of stuff, I don’t like it.”

She murmured with a frail, infant-like voice and gently let go of her grip on my cuff.

From there, she took one step, two steps, and so on in taking her distance.

Following her was impossible.

For me.

All I did was gaze up at the sky.

The bluish-white light that illuminated the bamboo forest behind me looked like it was frozen in time.

The moon couldn’t be seen any longer.

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The entire city of Kyoto was visible on the rooftop of Kyoto Station.

Mixed in the scenery were modern buildings, temples, Buddhist shrines, and various others. Between the spaces of these buildings were the bustling activities of the people below.

While the city itself had not changed from many years ago, this sight, however, did every day.

The everlasting, famous royal castle continued to change. But, the reason why this capital was adored by many was because of its unchanging foundation. Without going astray and without deteriorating to the times, this city's core continued to stay strong to this day. It was exactly because of that why people appreciated this city.

In other words, regardless of what distortions this city may go through, it will continue undisturbed.

If so, then human nature won't change. They can't change. It was an everlasting truth.

But, there were times where not changing was the correct decision. At least, that's what I want to believe in.

It was the last day of the field trip.

It was a short wait for the Shinkansen. I was waiting for someone at the gift shop without the slightest interest in the souvenirs offered there.

There was an individual who actually bothered to climb up those long outside stairs. It was the person who whispered something to me when we passed each other during the bus trip to Kyoto Station.

"Hallo, hallo~ did I make you wait?"

I turned my head towards that voice.

Her black hair drooped down to her shoulders and she had glasses with a red frame. You could see her eyes through the transparent lens of the glasses and both her facial features and her entire body were small in stature. If she was sitting at the counter in the library, it'd make quite an impressive painting.

It was the girl who gave me the request from earlier, Ebina Hina.

"I thought I'd give you my thanks."

"You don't need to. As far as your request is concerned, it hasn't been solved yet."

I answered briefly and shifted my eyes to the city of Kyoto once again. Of course, the voice behind me had reached my ears.

"On the surface at least. But, they get it now right?"

"……"

My answer was replaced with silence.

To me, Ebina was an irregular existence.

It was exactly because of that truth that, despite her cheerful exterior, I fall into the habit of trying to look beyond her words. Girls that looked obedient on the surface and indiscriminately came to talk to even me were obvious red flags. Because of

the experience I've accumulated from these girls in middle school, it became a habit for me to try to read into their words.

That's why I couldn't help but feel uneasy with this girl who took on the stance of a fujoshi. If she wanted a consultation, then I'd want to gauge her motives.

In regards to the request, the goal was to get the guys to get along better all the while building some distance between her and them. On top of that, she wanted to directly avoid Tobe's confession in such a way there wouldn't be any hard feelings afterwards.

It was likely that the Service Club wasn't the only one asked of this request; Hayama was probably asked as well.

That's why Hayama was worried and that's why he could only come up with a halfhearted solution.

"Thank you for earlier. You really helped me out there."

When I turned towards her in response to her energetic voice, Ebina had a relieved smile. If you could make a smile like that, I'm sure there were other things you could do too. As I thought that, words that didn't need to be said flew out.

"……Tobe may be a useless excuse for a human being but I think he's a pretty good guy."

"No way, no way. You know, Hikitani, you understand right? I mean, there's no way I'd be able to date anyone properly as I am right now."

"That's."

"It's true."

She answered without giving me room to say anything.

"I'm rotten after all."

Those words that were accompanied with a cold smile sounded as if they were excuses for someone.

"……I guess that's that then."

"Yep, that's that. No one will understand me and I don't want them to either. That's why I won't be able to properly date anyone."

Now then, was she referring to her hobbies or herself? Well, it wasn't anything worth asking about.

We exchanged small smiles and Ebina gently rose up her glasses. The gaze that was reflected on the lenses of those glasses was a mystery.

But after going "hoh", she raised her face. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and she wore the usual bright smile.

“Maybe if it was you Hikitani, we might be able to go out just fine.”

“Stop the jokes please. Keep going on with that and I just might end up falling for you.”

If you heard this from the side, it’d probably sound like a terrible joke in passing. Ebina shoulders shook as she laughed.

“I don’t dislike people like you who can think nothing of it and be honest about it.”

“What a coincidence. I actually don’t dislike that part of myself either.”

“Me too. I don’t dislike my heartless ability to spit out what I want to either.”

We both boasted with obscure smiles.

“You see, I really like how I am and my surroundings right now. It feels like it’s been awhile since I’ve felt something like this so I thought it’d be a waste to lose it. I really like where I am now and the people who’ll be there for me.”

Ebina’s eyes grew distant and she started for the big stairs going downwards. I couldn’t see anything but I’m sure what filled Ebina’s view was probably someone else.

As she took steps down the stairs while carefully looking at the floor, she added one more thing before leaving.

“That’s why I hate myself.”

I gazed silently at Ebina's back as she continued to go farther and farther away.

I tried to think of words that could serve as response to what she said, but nothing came to mind.

When it was just a small lie regarding your well being, you couldn’t praise yourself or criticize yourself.

Because you thought it was important. Because you didn’t want to lose it.

You try to hide and pretend.

But that was exactly why you would end up losing it.

And once you lost a hold of it, you’ll cry over it. If you knew you were going to lose it, it might’ve been better to not bother with it in the first place. If you were going to agonize over it to death, then it might've been better to just throw it aside.

In this changing world, relationships that were dependent on the notion of change probably existed. Things that were once broken and stayed broken existed as well.

That’s why everyone lies.

...But the biggest liar of them all was me.

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